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THE PARALISYS OF US FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

US foreign policy in the Middle East and Northern Africa is presently in a particularly difficult situation in part due to the new political scenario in the region.

Apart from the unconditional support for Israel which is part of the traditional US policy in the region (although the Obama administration has had difficulties in starting a constructive dialog with the Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu), the rest of surrounding scenario has undergone a substantial mutation. The US have failed this far in finding a common direction in foreign policy that could give coherent justifications for its hegemonic role. This is especially true – that's what politics are all about – when trying to act in its own interest without losing sight of the ethical-ideological aspects of such actions.

At first, when trying to face local problematic, the emotional response prevailed: the revolutions of the Arab world made clear reference to the longing for freedom, to the ousting of dictators, the search for social justice. The US, as a matter of principle, were supportive of these revolutions.

It happened in Egypt, in Tunisia, and many other similar situations in neighboring countries were looked upon with satisfaction. But the problems were yet to arise.

Egypt ousts Hosni Mubarak, a forefront ally of Washington, and immediately the US administration expressed its support for the Muslim Brothers. In the Egyptian social mixing pot, they were the better organized movement with strong territorial rooting. The choice was based on the hope that the movement could put aside its social-political configuration – that in the past had assumed subversive and revolutionary methods – in favor of a sense of the State and of social liberty. The US opted for a choice that seemed rewarding at the time: to support the movement that had the highest chances of success. By ingratiating such a powerful institution with so many affiliates and branches in the Islamic world, the US thought they could produce positive results in other parts of the region as well.

Yet as often happens in politics and in US wars, there is much thought about the present but no worthy hypothesis for the future. The US calculations didn't take into account the instability produced by a revolution. Most of all, the US underestimated the ideology of the religious movement that was spreading a vision of the world that has very little in common with the secular and libertarian ideals of the USA. It did not take long for this incompatibility to surface.

Once the military were ousted (they ensured a pro-Western direction in the country's policy), the Muslim Brothers, in light of their political past, have shown their real face. Their domestic policy was that of trying to impose the Islamization of society with scarce inclination for Western standards in freedom of expression and thought.

Despite the US decision to maintain the financial support unchanged, the economic problems of Egypt were not solved. Corruption was not dealt with and society was not liberalized. In fact, the legitimization that the US bestowed upon the present administration of Egypt could easily mutate into collusion with a regime that has done nothing to better the country's conditions and has not given satisfactory answers to the longing for liberty and justice expressed by the Arab Spring.

The Muslim Brothers have promoted their ideas and vision of the world abroad as well. Their foreign policy is also in contrast with the interests of the USA, but they have acted cautiously and have skillfully dissimulated their intention thus far.

The Muslim Brothers had always openly attacked the presence and policy of expansion of Israel. Now they alternate moderate stances with radical declarations. They keep supporting Hamas in Gaza, but at the same time they promoted the mediation between Palestinians and Israel. They have drawn Iran near by participating in the summit of the non-aligned countries, then they stationed in the Sunni spheres.

Mostly – as this is one of their constitutive characteristics – the Muslim Brothers have fueled, supported, protected or financed the radical Islamic world to which they belong. A fundamentalist galaxy where the political code of ethics suits religious visions and interests that are traditionally hostile to those of the USA.

Tunisia, the other country where the US supported the revolution against the corruption of the Trabelsi family and the failure of Ben Ali to concede further civil liberties, is now dealing with the resurgence of radical fundamentalism. It was no secret that, once in power, the Ennadha of Rashid Ghannouci – another movement that had been accused of terrorism by several Western countries – could promote the movement's characteristics domestically: islamization of society and more room for Salafite claims. The US choice to support Ghannouci might have been motivated by the person's long exile in Great Britain. Perhaps it was thought to be an objectively important factor. Tunisia is a country that is very near to the Western world. It is a popular tourist getaway if anything. Perhaps that's why it was deemed impossible that it might land in fundamentalist hands. The rise to power of the Ennadha has not solved the social problems in the country, nor has it increased the democratic inclination of the Tunisian political system. What continues to prevail is instability alone.

In Libya's case, trailing the French initiatives, the US supported military intervention against Muammar Khadafi. They also offered, as usual, their powerful military contribution. Yet, as in Iraq, the fall of the cruel dictator that was hated in Washington was not coupled with the identification of a credible alternative.

The deep rooting of Khadafi's power, which would have surely resisted the pressures of the Arab Spring if it hadn't been eradicated militarily, was grossly underestimated. Once Khadafi fell, the US found themselves unexpectedly on the side of the Islamic extremists that deposed the dictator. As one structure of power crumbled, there was no ready replacement for it (Perhaps Barack Obama, like his predecessor, believed in the myth of exported democracy). Libya was plunged into social chaos to this day. This chaos leaves much operative room for terrorism, as demonstrated by the murder of the US ambassador in Benghazi and the assault against the French embassy in Tripoli. It is hard to understand what, if any, political advantages are there for the US in the novel Libyan scenario.

True to our timeline, it is time to discuss the Syrian issue. After the loss on political and geo-strategic terms suffered by the war in Libya and mindful of the fact that backing Islamic movements produces an abnormal spread of fundamentalism, the US find themselves hesitant to offer their support to the various Islamic movements that are fighting against Bashar al Assad. In fact, prudence prevails on the Syrian issue. There exists a secular-based opposition fighting for power in Damascus – and this opposition could surely qualify for US support – but there is also another opposition – like Jabhat al Nusra, by far the more efficient fighting group in the lot – that is rooted in Islamic fundamentalism, has ties to Al Qaeda and has been listed among terrorist organizations.

So once again the same dilemma: can we, Americans, fight alongside a terrorist organization? Would it be convenient for the US to replace a despotic regime such as the Alawite regime with a new management that has a fundamentalist movement as their political point of reference (if not Al Nusra, this could be the Syrian Muslim Brothers who are de facto – as in Egypt – the more credible opposition movement against the regime)? Of course, the fall of the Damascus regime could weaken the regime in Iran by interrupting the territorial contiguity that presently grants the Hezbollah direct Iranian military support. Israel would benefit from such a scenario, and Washington would too, indirectly. Yet is it convenient to have yet another country with strong Islamic connotations in the Middle Eastern panorama?

All of these scenarios, interlinked in time and regarding the same geographical area, have made it difficult for the US to find and pursue a common denominator in foreign policy. There is strong social instability, some of the new administrations have yet to consolidate their newfound power and dialog with moderate political Islam looks more like a chimera than a political opportunity. Everything is difficult, every action is riddled with pros and cons. Every situation seems to float betwixt what is ethically just and what is politically wrong.

Meanwhile the US is paying once again the price of its uncritical support to the country of Israel, which is presently governed by an administration that is reluctant to adopt any solution that involves negotiation on the Palestinian issue. For the umpteenth time, the umpteenth US secretary of state is attempting to set the umpteenth negotiating table.

The US are also paying the price for their political culture that is short-sighted and deaf with regards to a complex world where white is never white and black is never black,

where shades, undertones, Byzantine behavior and intricate knots that are hard to unravel prevail. The main problem for the US today is to find a coherent, logical foundation for their intervention.

All this while keeping in mind that there are other actors on stage. There is Turkey that plays – and is trying to re-affirm – a dominant role in the region. Recep Erdogan's neo-Ottomanism. There is Israel that, when threatened by security issues, will lend the ear to no counsel. There is Russia that refuses to disavow its historical ties to Damascus. There is Qatar's struggle with Saudi Arabia for the political dominion of the Sunni. There is Iran, presently troubled by domestic political struggles, that won't and can't lose an ally like Syria. There is Iraq and its crawling civil war between Sunni and Shiites that is slowly becoming an element contiguous to the interests of Teheran. There is Lebanon that is once again treading on the very edge of the chasm of civil war.

And then there are a series of other issues, the developments of which are hard to foresee. We have the Kurdish issue that, after the agreement between Turkey and the PKK, could promote the creation of a new state. We have the Bahrein issue where the Sunni minority abuses the Shiite majority. We have the struggle in Yemen between the north and the south. The Syrian crisis that slowly but surely overflows into neighboring countries. The Palestinian issue that could fuel a new intifada. Finally, we have other despotic regimes, as are many of the monarchies in the Persian gulf, that have been grazed marginally by the Arab Spring but are good credentials to become brand new battlefields.

The main issue – not only for the USA – is that all of this social and political instability fuels terrorism. Not only in Afghanistan and Iraq, but in the new theaters as well: Syria, Libya, Mali... To these we must add other dangerous sources of contagion such as the Huiti in Yemen, the Salafites in Tunisia and Egypt, the Sunni gangs in Iraq and the radical Palestinian movements. If observed from a slightly broader viewpoint, the Somali Shabaab and the Nigerian Boko Haram could also join the lot.

It thus becomes difficult, not only for the US, to unravel the knots of intertwined scenarios where cause and effect generate results that sometimes invalidate intentions. Every choice becomes a dilemma in terms of benefits and losses, between that which is convenient and that which is counterproductive.

US policy suffers greatly from the present state of things because its geo-strategic interests are more complex and important than those of others. Also, the US have lost – after the fall of the Soviet Union - a sense of identity and belonging in a world where there are no more ideologies to fight (these have been skillfully replaced by the improper use of Islam). A world where the enemy is harder to identify, it is not one entity anymore and is has diversified forms and characteristics. It is an asymmetrical battle that the US is not accustomed to fighting.

Barack Obama, more-so than the presidents that preceded him, in an attempt to promote a foreign policy that would value principles (not just interest), will be more penalized than others in the world-to-be. He inherited two wars that produced disastrous results (Iraq

being a wrong war, and Afghanistan a badly-managed one) and felt the urgent need to pull out of the Middle Eastern bog where his predecessor had landed him whilst attempting to depict the US role in an ethically positive light. Psychologically speaking, Obama is looking to pull out, not be involved deeper. Yet the circumstances prevent him from doing so.

THE STRUCTURE OF POWER IN SYRIA: THE SECURITY APPARATUS

The ongoing civil war in Syria leads us to enquire how the Bashar al Assad regime, opposed by the international community (with the sole exception of Russia and Iran) and based on the loyalty of the Alawite minority (10-12% of the population of Syria), has made it through two years of clashes and fighting.

The answer lies in the security apparatus and in the Armed Forces that form the backbone of Baathist power and that have withheld rebel advances.

The security apparatus

The organization of the Information and Security Services in Syria is structured around 6 different organizations. Some of them report directly to the President of the Republic, others within their Armed Forces, while another to the Baath party itself. Together they interact and, especially under the current emergency rule, supply the regime, its dignitaries and armed forces with an efficient security framework and control of the territory. To note that they all act brutally, with unlimited license to kill and using terror as a deterrent.

Directorate for Political Security

The Directorate for Political Security (Idarat al Amn al Siyasi, DPS) reports directly to President Bashar al Assad. Its tasks are the fight against all political opposition, dissidents and political parties that could undermine the leadership of the Baath party, the control and censorship of the press and mass media and the control of foreigners on national soil.

The Directorate also manages interrogation and detention centers and its branches are scattered all over Syria. One of its divisions also operates abroad. Split between operative and investigative units, its headquarters are in Damascus.

The chiefs of the Directorate have almost always been from the Alawite community (a recurrent pattern to all intelligence organizations). Yet, since July 2012 the DPS is lead by a Sunni from the Deraa region (this partly explains the regime's tenacity in crushing rebels in that part of the country), Rustum Ghazaleh.

Known for his endeavors during the civil war in Lebanon, Ghazaleh is accused of being part of the plot to eliminate former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, killed in a car bomb attack in Beirut in February 2005. Rustum Ghazaleh was interrogated by the UN Commission of Inquiry due to his hate speech targeting Hariri in the months prior to the incident. For this reason, the current head of the DPS has been targeted by the international community and his assets abroad frozen. Following Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, even President Assad had prudently kept Rustum Ghazaleh out of the spotlight.

Ghazaleh is also accused of arms and drug trafficking. The accusations were made public by former Syrian deputy president, Abdul Halim Khaddam, former leader of the Sunni community before his ousting and escape to exile in France. Khaddam was convicted in absentia to forced labor for life.

Khaddam's dismissal and the burst of the civil war have raised Rustum Ghazaleh's status within the Sunni military elite supporting the regime and in President Assad's eyes. Ghazaleh can also provide further added value in times of emergency: he has good links with the Lebanese Hezbollah for his years in the Bekaa Valley. And the Hezbollah are now fighting alongside the loyalists against the insurgents.

Service for Presidential Security

The Service for Presidential Security (Jihaz al Amn al Riasa) is the second organism reporting directly to the President. Its primary institutional role is to guarantee the security of the President, its staff and, on a wider scale, of the dignitaries of the regime. Under some respects, it is considered a Service within the Services because its men are concealed within the other security structures. The organism can rely on a consistent budget and, as can easily be imagined, wide operational discretion.

Directorate for General Security

The Directorate for General Security (Idarat al Amn al Amm, DGS) reports to the President of the Republic through the Office of National Security of the Baath party. The two powers ruling over Syria here overlap: the president and the party politically supporting the president. This Directorate operates both internally and abroad.

On the home front, it is tasked with counter-espionage, control over hostile political groups, opposers and foreigners (just like the Directorate for Political Security), religious and ethnic minorities (like the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the main forces opposing the regime) and other social and mass organizations. The Directorate is also responsible for the fight against corruption and drug trafficking.

Abroad, the DGS is dedicated to the control and elimination of opponents, the control and protection of Syria's diplomatic offices and espionage.

The Directorate is structured along three main branches: internal and external security and a third branch tasked with the control of Palestinian groups on Syrian soil and in nearby Lebanon.

The current chief of the DGS is Mohammed Dib Zaitoun, an Alawite that has already lead the Directorate for Political Security before leaving his post to Rustum Ghazaleh. Zaitoun is considered one of the closest people to Bashar al Assad. He was appointed in July 2012 in the aftermath of the car bomb attack that decimated the regime's security chiefs. Mohammed Dib Zaitoun has also been black listed by the European Union for his direct involvement in the repression following the current civil war.

His predecessor Ali Mamlouk, a Sunni also targeted by EU and US sanctions for human rights violations, is the head of the Office of National Security of the Baath party. On February 4 2013 Lebanon has issued an arrest warrant for Mamlouk for plotting to kill Lebanese religious and political leaders.

Directorate for Military Intelligence

The Directorate (or Service) for Military Intelligence (Shu'bat al Mukhabarat al Askariya, DMI) reports to the Commander of Land Forces. It is tasked with military espionage and counter-espionage, it manages Military Attachés abroad and controls the foreign ones in Syria. Just like similar organisms, the DMI concurs to the security of the regime even outside strictly military matters.

Its current chief is Major General Rafiq Shahada. Shahada has been at the helm of DMI since July 2012. His predecessor, Gen. Assef Shawkrat, married to Bashar al Assa'd sister Bushra, died in the Damascus attack. Just like his colleagues, Rafiq Shahad is also black listed for human rights violations.

Directorate for Naval Intelligence

The Directorate (or service) for Naval Intelligence (Idarat al Mukhabarat al Bahriyya) operates within its armed force. It hierarchically reports to the Commander of Naval Forces and besides the traditional military espionage/counterespionage, it provides and grants the security of both naval units, ports and Navy infrastructures. The Navy being the smallest of Syria's armed forces (with an estimated 4.000 men), its intelligence service is somewhat limited.

The only element in support of this Directorate is the fact that Naval military structures are based on the coast, whose population is mainly Alawite, and that the main ports of Latakia and Tartous (hosting Russian fleets since 1971) represent Moscow's strategic footholds in the Mediterranean. Naval Intelligence is based in Latakia and reports to Military Intelligence. Its actions span is limited to the coast, its coastal defense units and naval infantry.

Directorate for Air Force Intelligence

The Directorate for Air Force Intelligence (Idarat al Mukhabarat al Jawiyya, DAFI) reports to the Commander of Air Forces and is dedicated to the control of air military personnel and to the protection and security of the various airport infrastructures. It is also tasked with the surveillance of air space and thus in charge of two major intelligence activities: IMINT (Imagery Intelligence) and SIGINT (Signal Intelligence). The Directorate is also in charge of wiretaps (usually hiring the ladies signed up at the Female Academy in Damascus). During political turmoil in Syria (the past Muslim Brotherhood uprising and the ongoing civil war) the Directorate shifts its activities towards policing and repression.

Syrian Air Forces have 16 bases scattered across the country, plus 8 civilian airports. Five military bases have fallen into rebel hands. Several chemical agents stocks are supposedly hosted in air bases. This is the measure of how important Air Forces are with respect to other armed forces.

The current Commander of the Air Forces is Major General Ali Mahmoud, a man deemed extremely loyal to the regime. The selection of military pilots in Syria has always been restricted to Alawites and to people trusted by the al Assad regime. The father of Bashar al Assad, Hafez, was himself an air force official when he staged the coup that brought him

to power in 1970. This is also one of the reasons why the Air Force – and its intelligence service – plays such a crucial role.

The current chief of the Directorate is General Jami Hassan, appointed in 2009. The rebels claimed he had been killed in August 2012, but the news was never confirmed and was eventually denied by the regime. The EU and the U.S. have both black listed Hassan for human rights violations.

Coordination and skills

All intelligence activities report, directly or indirectly, to the President of the Republic. Bashar al Assad also employs other organisms/people to control a vital branch for the survival of his regime.

The President is assisted by the Deputy President who is in charge of applying the security policy measures dictated by his superior.

In turn, the Deputy President heads the Office for National Security to direct and control the different Service/Directorates.

In theory, the Office for National Security should play a coordination role between the different intelligence agencies and act as a consultant to the President. The truth is each organization is autonomous and reports directly to the President.

A step lower lies the above mentioned Office for National Security of the Baath party tasked with coordinating the activities of the intelligence agencies in conjunction with the Office of National Security.

As already mentioned, all these organizations have overlapping skills. During times of peace, this allowed President Assad to cross-check their activities. The outbreak of the civil war has instead turned these capabilities into an instrument for tougher territorial control and in a repressive tool against both the civilian population and the insurgents. In fact, today most of these agencies play more of a policing role, rather than their statutory intelligence activity.

THE SYSTEM OF POWER IN SYRIA: THE ARMED FORCES

The Armed Forces are the second crucial pillar to the survival of Bashar al Assad's regime. An elephantine, efficient and motivated apparatus that, despite over two years of conflict and some setbacks, has remained compact and military capable.

Just like the intelligence agencies, the Armed Forces report directly to the President of the Republic who is also Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

The Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staffs play instead a marginal role in the management of the military and they are basically tasked with applying the President's decisions.

The current Minister of Defense is a Sunni, Fahd Jassem al Frej. He was appointed in July 2012 when his predecessor was killed in the Damascus attack that decimated the regime's security chiefs. A loyalist, Frej is the former Chief of Staffs. His activities during the civil war had come under scrutiny. But his appointment as a Minister signals a renewed trust in his capabilities. The zeal in his fight against the rebels has recently earned Fahd Jassem al Frej the U.S. black list for human rights violations. In Syria's military and political hierarchy the Minister of Defense is also Deputy Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

The current Chief of Staffs is Ali Abdullah Ayoub, who took over from Frej last year. He is one of the few military chiefs not to be black listed by the West.

Air Defense, Air Forces and all those units tasked with the protection of the regime's dignitaries, like the Republican Guard (the size of an armored division, 25.000 men lead by Gen. Shoaeb Suleiman) and the 4th Armored Division (25.000 men tasked with the defense of Damascus under the leadership of Bashar al Assad's brother, Maher), report directly to the President of the Republic. They are both based in Damascus and formed by elite corps. In truth, both Armed Divisions are lead by Mahed Assad.

General structure

Since 1952 Syria has imposed mandatory conscription for all men at the age of 18. The duration of the national service has been progressively reduced: it was 30 months in 1974, 24 months in 2005 and 18 months since 2011. Women can volunteer for the military.

Once the national service is over, personnel transits in the active reserve (until 45) and then into the territorial reserve (until 60). For selected individuals with specific know-how the call to arms can last for several weeks.

At this time, it is not possible to quantify the number of reservists since the civil war has increased the number of ethnic and religious defectors. In times of peace, the reserve amounted to 300-350.000 men. But the reliability and quality of reservists greatly varied. An estimated 15-20% of reservists are the human potential on which the regime has been able to rely on. This means loyalists have been able to count on no more than 70 to 80.000 men.

Overall, about 70% of career soldier are Alawite. The difficulties in drafting a fair amount of individuals was highlighted in March 2013 when the Syrian Great Mufti, Ahmad Badredeen al Hassoun, stated in his preaching that the call to arms was a national duty.

The reservists should have increased the number of military forces already in arms that amount to about 300.000 units: 200.000 in the Army, 4.000 in the Navy, 38.000 in the Air Forces and 58.000 in Air Defense.

The Army

As stated, Land Forces amount to about 200.000 men. They are structured into 3 Armed Corps, reduced to 2 following Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. The two Armed Corps divided the territories they are responsible for: the 1st Armed Corps operates in the South (along the border with Jordan and Israel), the 3rd Armed Corps operates on the remaining portion of Syria. The civil war has modified this approach as both forces concentrate their military activities where needed.

Overall, Syrian Land Forces can count on 12 Divisions (7 of whom are armored) and 3 independent brigades (infantry and mechanized infantry). Each Division also includes 2 anti-tank brigades, 2 artillery brigades and 4 missile brigades. There are also a series of minor units (regiments and logistical support units) the operate within the Armed Corps.

The Syrian army is a powerful structure with a strong force of impact (4.600 tanks and as many armored vehicles) and fire power: over 5.300 artillery pieces, missile systems (SCUD B, SCUD C, FROG 7, SS-21) and anti-tank systems (over 4.000 units).

Despite the civil war having reversed battle orders and the location of military units on the ground, Syria had been divided into Military Regions under the responsibility of a Local Command reporting and acting on behalf of central military authorities. Just like the Soviet system, the operative discretion of local units was severely limited. But the ongoing conflict has granted greater autonomy to peripheral commands.

The 7 Military Regions are: Damascus (its HQ is in Qatana), coastal (Latakia), southern (Al Sawayda), northern (Aleppo), central (Homs), eastern (Deir al Zor) and south-western.

The Navy

The Navy is structured into 3 Maritime Departments: Tartous, Latakia and Mina al Bayda (hosting the Naval Academy). Numerically it is irrelevant, just like its contribution in fighting the rebellion. The Syrian Navy has 3 submarines, 11 patrol boats (plus 16 missile boats), 2 frigates, 3 amphibious warfare vessels and 16 auxiliary units. The importance of the Syrian Navy lies in the fact that its bases on the coast are based in predominantly Alawite territories. This could represent the regime's last stand in case of a downturn of events. In fact, during the civil war these areas have been "cleared" of all remnants of Sunni communities.

The Airforce

Out of all Armed Forces, the Air Force is considered the most loyal to the regime. This is because Hafez al Assad, Bashar's father, was an aviation official and also because air supremacy has always been crucial to the regime's survival (and recent civil war developments confirm this belief).

The training cycle of military pilots is preceded by a rigid verification of the candidates' reliability and is particularly severe. Currently the Syrian Air Force can count on around 1.000-1.100 "ready combat" pilots.

The Air Force is structured along 5 independent Brigades and 2 Divisions (composed of 3 brigades and 5 brigades respectively) whose Commands are in Dumayr and Sharyat.

Even more important, Syria's Air Force can rely on over 500 combat airplanes (all produced in the Soviet Union or Russia: MIG-21, MIG-23, MIG-25, MIG-29 and SU-22, SU-24, SU-27), on around 40 transport airplanes (Soviet/Russian Tupolev, Ilyushin and Antonov planes now used to move troops to hot spots), on over 150 training airplanes (easily converted for combat missions) and on over 300 combat helicopters (Russian MIs and French Gazelle).

As stated, the overall strength of the Air Force is of 40.000 men, plus the 60.000 employed by Air Defense. The latter is based on the use of interceptors (the MIGs) and on missile and artillery anti-aircraft units (2 Divisions). Even though the missile batteries are pretty obsolete and hardly ever used, their efficiency is basically irrelevant given the rebel's lack of air capabilities. The scenario would be totally different if an international intervention were to impose a no-fly zone or arm the rebels. Overall, Air Defense has over 650 missiles and 3.800-4.000 piece of anti-aircraft artillery in its arsenal.

Another important aspect is the Air Force's control of Syrian air space through a system of automated spotters that transmit their data to two commands: one in Damascus, the other one in Homs. These commands also have offices in Banyas, Jebel Mane, Dumayr and Chenchar.

Paramilitary forces

There are also other military forces currently on the ground. There is the Police, counting on 8 to 9 thousand men, and the so-called "Workers' Militia", stemming from the active Baath Party militants. The latter are known with the name of "shabiha" (the ghosts), a term used to identify secret service agents and criminals (mainly smugglers) working for the regime and dedicated to the dirty work against rebels and dissidents. There are no reliable estimates on the size of these irregular groups, but some analysts have come up with a figure of 40 to 50 thousand men. Before the conflict over 100 thousand people were members of the Baath party.

Assessment

Information and disinformation make an estimate of the loyalist and rebel forces on the ground extremely difficult. The sole indisputable fact is that, following a lengthy and bloody

civil war, the armed forces supporting the regime have not collapsed. Furthermore, even though they lost some ground, their attacking capacity is basically unaffected.

Part of the answer lies in the presence on the battle field alongside the loyalists of the Lebanese Hezbollah (7 to 8 thousand men) and of the Iranian Basiji (a few thousand). Even arms supplies from Russia and Iran, that has signed a mutual defense agreement with Syria, have continued to flow.

After all, the Syrian regime has never skimped on military expenses. The 2012 budget was around 2.5 billion dollars. Over 90% of weapons are purchased from Russia, a detail partly explaining Moscow's stance in support of Bashar al Assad.

With regard to Weapons of Mass Destruction, Syria has officially signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (the September 2007 Israeli attack against the Al Kibar plant tells a different story), signed (but not ratified) the Convention on Biological Weapons and is not party to the Convention on Chemical Weapons (chemical and biological weapons stocks are hidden all over Syria).

The atrocities committed on both fronts of the civil war have definitely exacerbated the fighting, fueling both revenge and cruelty. But they have also consolidated loyalist forces that are now fighting for victory and, above all, for their survival since they know there will be no pity for the defeated.

To think that after such a bloodshed a negotiated solution between the parties is possible is mere utopia. And this is regardless of Russian and American mediation attempts.