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## THE WORLD THROUGH TURKEY'S EYES

It is presently difficult to decipher Turkey's contradictory, disorderly and domestically-dictated foreign policy. The attempts to influence conflicts in the region on the basis of the Ottoman past has basically isolated Recep Tayyip Erdogan and tarnished his ambitions to revamp the long-gone glory days.

### **The Kurdish issue**

In order to prevail during November 2015's parliamentary elections, Erdogan decided to open the internal Kurdish front with the PKK. Negotiations were abandoned, a two-year-old cease-fire was scrapped and war was declared to the Kurdish minority, putting the south-east of Turkey into a state of permanent civil war. The main victims were both the pro-Kurdish MPs from the HDP, that sought a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and the Turkish civilians and soldiers that perished in the PKK attacks.

The recent Turkish advance in the north west of Syria aims instead at targeting the Syrian Kurds from the YPG, whom Ankara claims to be affiliated with the PKK. It is of little or no importance for Turkey that the YPG spearheads international efforts against Daesh. In Erdogan's view there are "good Kurds", like the Iraqi ones with whom Ankara has strong political and economic ties, and "bad Kurds", basically all the others, who should be eliminated.

However, the credit gained on the battlefield by the Syrian Kurds will be spent at the appropriate time. The Turkish president should be aware of the fact that the Kurdish community, although for centuries scattered among several different countries, has maintained a strong cohesion and will continue to fight until history rewards them.

### **The relationship with Russia and the war in Syria**

The downing of a Russian fighter jet whose flight path had crossed into Turkish airspace for something like 7 seconds on November 24, 2015 was a predetermined intervention, or a "predetermined provocation" as Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov put it. This reckless act only brought a series of negative consequences for Turkey, both economic (a block to exports to Russia, a block to Russian tourists to Turkey, the freezing of the South Stream gas pipeline project etc.), and political as far as Turkish stances in Syria are concerned. Eventually Recep Tayyip Erdogan had to swallow his pride and beg Putin pardon in Moscow last August.

A year on it is still hard to grasp what pushed Turkey to go head-on collision with Russia. It is difficult to believe the reason was Russian bombing of Turkmen rebels in Syria. Erdogan wanted the spotlight and he got it for the wrong reasons. He wanted Bashar al Assad to be toppled, although the relationship between the two countries was good. He decided to support and arm the rebels to fight against Damascus. In doing so he allowed Daesh to use Turkey as its logistical base, with its inflow of foreign fighters and loose frontiers.

Today Recep Tayyip Erdogan thinks Bashar al Assad could even stay in power. What is sure is that his battle in Syria was lost.

### **The US, Europe and NATO**

The relationship with Barack Obama's administration and NATO have been other sources of conflict. From the initial denial to use the Incirlik aerial base to bomb ISIS, to the harsh critics for the human rights violations against alleged coup plotters or terrorists (be they Kurds or Gulenists) until the government-spread rumors of a CIA involvement in the failed July 15 coup, it is hard to grasp on which side Turkey wants to be on.

The same can be said with Europe. The billions promised to lock the frontiers to refugees moving towards Europe have not been compensated by free Visas, nor by the success in the negotiations to access the European Union. And now, after the European Parliament expressed its unfavorable vote, that option has finally faded. Erdogan, who is about to modify the Constitution to grant the president more powers (ridding the country of a de facto situation in which the head of government is not the elected PM, but the president himself), has gone as far as accusing Europe of sponsoring terrorism.

Under the rule of the AKP, the islamization of Turkey continues and pushes the country to look east. Ankara has announced it wants to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a body led by Russians and Chinese. This shows, once more, how incongruous Erdogan's foreign policy is.

### **The African venture**

Turkey's African expansion is also extremely contradictory. Since 2008, Turkey asked the African Union to grant them the status of strategic partners. Ankara has built privileged and strong ties with Somalia, South Africa, Ethiopia, Gabon and Ghana. Mogadishu is a favorite of Turkey, where it has built the biggest embassy in Africa – inaugurated by Erdogan himself – and continues to support the local government, including frequent presidential tours to Istanbul.

It is unclear what the ultimate scope of this proliferation of diplomatic and business initiatives across the continent is. Geo-strategic targets? Highlighting the Turkish role in a continent where anyone with a big enough purse can basically play the big man? Megalomania of an autocratic president? Islamic proselytism?

### **An Islamist foreign policy**

Overall, Turkey's foreign policy is influenced by the AKP's affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. It supported Mohamed Morsi in Egypt and broke ties with Cairo once he was ousted. The same happened in Tunisia once Rachid Ghannouchi left government. Or in Libya with the support – alongside Qatar – of the Islamic government in Tripoli and so forth. In all of these circumstances, Turkey never showed the flexibility required by diplomacy, especially in a region in constant turmoil as the Middle East.

More isolated than ever, what Turkey did was look to Saudi Arabia, although they were never too friendly with the Brotherhood. Erdogan joined the so-called "Islamic NATO" led by the Saudis and which is none other than the Sunni front against the Shia and Iran. Once again this puts Turkey in the uncomfortable position of taking sides in an inter-Islamic conflict when 30% of its citizens are either Shia or Alevi. But, after all, the government funded Directorate for Religious Affairs treats the Shia and Alevis as infidels and sons of a lesser god.

### **The relationship with Islamic terrorism**

Ambiguity is dangerous, especially when dealing with Daesh or ISIS. This is the main lesson for Turkish authorities, as proven by the string of terrorist attacks that have hit the country. Turkey has played with fire, offering the militias from the Caliphate a free pass on its soil and arming the groups willing to support its anti-Damascus agenda. They allowed them to sell Iraqi and Syrian oil pumping cash into the coffers of ISIS on what is now known as the "jihadi highway" of hundreds of trucks loaded with oil. And finally, Turkey did nothing to prevent ISIS attacks against pro-Kurdish groups in Suruc and Ankara in 2015, in what is still the worst terrorist attack on Turkish soil.

Maybe Recep Tayyip Erdogan thought that all the support would have granted him immunity at home. That this indirect collusion with the terrorists would have prevented future attacks. Foul play just hit back. Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's terrorists don't distinguish between friends and foes, and especially friends that have turned their back on you. And Turkey had to pay the price of international pressure when it was forced to end its undercover support to ISIS and the other al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria.

### **The domestic involution**

It is pretty evident that Turkey's foreign policy is being affected by what happens at home. We're not witnessing the planned out policy of a democratic government, but the convulsion of an authoritarian regime. The boss's mood dictates policies and initiatives. The end result is a reckless foreign policy approach, which hardly takes into account the consequences of one's actions. It is like as if every move was improvised and dictated by the latest twist of events.

Turkey has always had problems when dealing with the Middle East and North Africa. They just couldn't come to terms with the fact that the Ottoman Empire was over, that these people were not their subjugates anymore. Once that psychological hurdle was overcome, one would have hoped for a foreign policy that would have tried to solve the

complexity of the Middle East and not end up meddling with each and every crisis. But this never happened.

## **ALGERIA, A NEW PRESIDENT IN SIGHT**

Algeria is a silent country. No one talks about it. But rather than silent, the country is still. Its president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, is physically incapable of exerting his role, but is still at the helm. There is a simple reason for that: he is not the power. His poor health conditions, repeated tours at the hospital and a neurodegenerative condition don't allow him to run the country. And this has been the case since his first election back in 1999.

The true power in Algeria, what is commonly known as "le pouvoir", is in the hands of the political-military class, but mainly the military, that fought the war of liberation against the French and obtained independence on July 5, 1962. Nothing has changed since.

### **From independence to blind terrorism**

The National Liberation Front, the party founded by Ben Bella in 1954, is the political branch of the Algerian power-brokers. The one-party regime evolved when multiparty rule was introduced in 1989, but still played a key role in the Algerian political system. Was this a democratic evolution in Algerian politics? No, it was rather a necessity.

At that time the country was undergoing deep social upheavals, the population demanded more democracy, the ISF (Islamic Salvation Front) led the protests. The ISF was an Islamist party – opposed to the secular and socialist rule of the NLF – that had a great following in the Algerian middle class. The country also had high unemployment rates, especially among the youth, that had reached unacceptable levels. Exploiting the discontent and its deep-rooted presence in the mosques, the ISF won local elections in June 1990 and would have taken over Parliament in the vote that followed.

This is when the military stepped in with a coup. They arrested the leadership of the Front, banned the Islamic movements and outlawed the ISF. This was possible because the radical Islamic agenda of the ISF – they wanted to introduce Sharia law in a mainly secular society – had scared large portions of Algerian society that viewed the military takeover as the lesser evil.

Islamic terrorism against a State was thus born in Algeria in the 1990s. The ISF went underground and the Armed Islamic Movement became its military branch. Then came the terrorist groups: the GIA (Islamic Armed Group), then renamed GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat). They practiced an "aveugle", or blind, form of terrorism that targeted the civilian population. In historical terms, they were the precursors of the Islamic State or Daesh in Syria and Iraq.

The Algerian military regime fought back terrorism with the same degree of ruthlessness. A general, Liamine Zeroual, was elected president and didn't pay a lot of attention to human rights in his war against the terrorists. There was no room for amnesty or international mediations. The Community of St. Egidio attempted an intervention, but without any success. The regime refused all meddling. Sant'Egidio became known as "Sant'Eccidio", i.e. Saint Massacre. The unrequested attempt was perceived as a neocolonialist intervention. During the civil war Berbers and Christians were largely fighting alongside the French and are still viewed as traitors, or *harkis*.

Algerian Islamic terrorism was eventually crushed brutally and efficiently by the army and is now confined to the country's south, in the desert. Sub-Saharan countries like Mali and Niger, which are socially unstable, are now paying the price for this relocation, while it is basically non-existent in Algeria. Not even the growing terrorist threat in neighboring Tunisia and Libya has been able to affect Algerian security.

### **A spring that never was**

When the Arab Spring kicked off in 2011, with its tail of mostly Islamist uprisings, Algeria experienced a *deja vu*. In other words, Algeria was more than ready to deal with a social revolution and remained largely unscathed if compared to what happened elsewhere in the region.

Now that the terrorist threat is over, has Algeria improved its democracy or developed an economy capable of offering an opportunity to its unemployed youth? The answer lies in the facts. Algeria is formally a democracy under military tutorship. There may be a political debate, a proliferation of parties, but the status quo will not change. Politics should keep away from "le pouvoir".

On the economic front, the youth unemployment rate is currently around 30%, a critical level if we consider that 40% of the population is under 24 years old and if we look at how wealthy Algeria is. The country is one of the world's top exporters of oil and gas. In 2016 they will receive around 40 billion dollars of receipts – a figure that has been influenced by low oil prices – which represent about 94% of the country's exports.

The issue is thus not how much money the country makes, but how it is spent. The regime's immobility has led to widespread corruption. When the people in charge don't change, the flow of money is not "democratized", the economic system becomes sclerotic and in the hands of a few privileged ones. While limited number of people enrich themselves, the masses starve.

When multiparty rule was introduced, Algeria also went from being a State-led economy to a market economy. The liberalization of the political system was to go hand-in-hand with the liberalization of the economy. This was a crucial moment for the evolution of Algerian society because, at least in theory, opening up the market should have led to the eradication of privileges and lobbies. The story took instead another turn because the system generated its anti-bodies.

The people within the State that managed the imports of a designated product or oversaw a State-sector simply moved their activities from the State to the private sector. And while earlier they were, at least nominally, working in the best interest of the State, they then did it for their own personal profit. Corruption and privileges didn't disappear, but wealth basically shifted into private hands.

### **Change everything, change nothing**

One of Algeria's main traits is to change without changing. This happened in economics, politics and in the people ruling the country. And it's the same thing happening with the likes of Bouteflika, who continues to be president despite his health problems.

In the security sector, change only comes with death. This was the case for general Smain Lamari who led counter-espionage and anti-terrorism for several years and who passed away in 2007. The same happened with the head of the Direction Général de la Sureté Nationale, homeland security, Ali Tounsi, who was killed by one of his officers in 2010. Algeria's security apparatus, alongside the military, is one of the keys to uphold and manage power.

When change does occur, and it happens in a subtle way, it signifies that someone is going up or down the social and political ladder. New people do come about from time to time, like major general Athmane Tartag, who recently rose from darkness to become the head of Algerian security services. He replaces Mohamed Médiene, known as Toufiq, a legendary figure in the fight against terrorism. Toufiq was known as a fearless man, who travelled the country without an armed escort, a ghost that would appear out of nowhere in the country's hotspots or during the hottest moments. Even in Algiers' *casbah*, where he was born and where terrorists were hiding.

Médiene's replacement is not a demotion, but rather a simple sign of the times. In the Algerian system of power every move is agreed upon, mediated and part of a smooth process. After 25 years at the helm of the security apparatus, it was time for Toufiq to go. He is still very influential. Even after his demise, Mohamed Médiene was still seen at the Direction du Reinsegnement et Sécurité, the structure that coordinated the different Algerian agencies. And the DRS, that was founded when he took over, was disbanded when he left it.

Now that the DRS is gone – at least in theory it answered to the president (although the opposite was more plausible) – Tartag, known as the bombardier for his attitude to air-strike the terrorists, has been appointed the president's security advisor. He now coordinates Algeria's security apparatus: the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure, the Direction Générale de la Sureté Exterieur and the Direction des Reinsegnement Techniques. However, unlike in the past when all informations gathered flowed into the DRS, each agency now operates autonomously and independently. The aim is to prevent that a single individual controls the entire security of the country.

Tartag is not Toufiq, both in terms of management of the intelligence sector and attitude. The times they are changing. The terrorist threat that put "le pouvoir" in peril is no more, and security can now be handled by the president directly without any intermediaries. The military is handing responsibilities over to civilians, and no security structure within the State holds a dominant position.

The only issue with the decree signed by Abdelaziz Bouteflika, or that they made him sign, is that it gives the president a power that the incumbent, given his health, is not capable of exerting. And for those capable of observing the imperceptible movements within the regime, this can only mean that there is an ongoing process to pick Bouteflika's successor.

Toufiq was one of the president's most trusted men. Another detail that confirms that there will soon be a rotation at the presidency.

When will this happen? The answer is: when everything is ready and the designated person is in the best condition for a takeover. A negotiation that will happen away from public scrutiny. The name will surface only once a decision has been taken. There won't be any need for further constitutional amendments – the Constitution has been amended twice already to grant Bouteflika a third and fourth mandate – because article 88 of the Algerian Constitution states that a sick president incapable of exerting his role can be replaced. And the pre-conditions for this to happen in the near future are all there at the moment.



## **IS THERE A SOLUTION TO MOROCCO'S SAHARAWI PROBLEM?**

For the past 40 years, Moroccan foreign policy has been conditioned by the unsolved issue of the Saharawi and by the country's opposition to the recognition of the Democratic Arab Republic of the Saharawi (RASD). The thorny situation, inherited by King Mohammed VI from his father, Hassan II, has conditioned the role of Morocco in Africa (RASD is represented within the African Union, while Morocco isn't since 1984) and hindered international relations, especially with the UN.

### **The RASD must go**

Now it looks like the Moroccan monarch intends to solve the issue by finding a way back into the African Union, and he wants to do so without granting any diplomatic leeway. The nearly 150 thousand Moroccan soldiers that occupy 75% of the Saharawi territory are there to stay.

Mohammed VI is trying to disenfranchise the RASD. He reasons that, if the RASD doesn't exist, then the violated rights of the Saharawi won't exist either. But in order to do this, Mohammed VI needs the African Union to withdraw their recognition of the RASD because – this is both an unshakable dogma and a limit of Moroccan policy – Morocco will not be part of the AU until RASD is kicked out of it.

### **Morocco's 'lobbying'**

Currently, Morocco's is busy convincing other AU member countries that they should withdraw their recognition of the Saharawi. King Mohamed VI visited various African nations of late to enact this plan. The investments and loans granted to several countries by the Moroccan Bank for Foreign Commerce are a helpful instrument in this respect. The King began with the French-speaking countries (where the help of the French government makes eases persuasion), then moved on to the English speakers by using the Islamic 'element'. After all, the Alawite dynasty of the Moroccan kings is connected directly to the Prophet.

The money–pledges–religion combination is slowly producing positive results for Morocco. This was evident during the last AU summit in Kigali, where 28 countries out of 54 signed a petition to suspend RASD from the organization. There followed a shower of investments by Morocco in Senegal, the construction of a pharmaceutical plant and a housing development contract in Rwanda, the cleaning and reclamation of a bay in Ivory Coast (where Morocco has become the main commercial partner) and other investments in Gabon, Zambia, Tanzania (where Morocco will build a Mosque), Ethiopia, Madagascan and Nigeria.

All of these nations were visited personally by the king, followed by a number of private investors and State officials. But the king is not the only one campaigning against RASD. The Moroccan Foreign Minister Mezouar, his security counselor and a fierce crowd of diplomats are out there doing the groundwork.

### **The obstacles ahead**

Despite the diplomatic and financial effort, there are still obstacles ahead of Morocco. The first is embodied by Algeria, the main supporter, both diplomatically, financially and politically, of the RASD. Without Algeria's support and their Tindouf refugee camps, the Saharawi would be no more. But Algeria is also one of the most important nations within the African Union. On top of that, the AU's Department for Peace and Security, which would be tasked with sorting the Saharawi mess, is headed by an Algerian national. The AU is certainly willing to accept Morocco among its members but they are still not enthusiastic about doing away with the RASD.

In November this year, during an Arab/African summit in Equatorial Guinea, the AU insisted on having a delegation of the Polisario on board, forcing Morocco to withdraw its participation. Some members of the Persian Gulf's Arab League (The League has always sided with Morocco against the RASD) and Somalia (A member of both Arab League and AU) did the same.

### **Morocco's insistence**

Morocco is convinced that the RASD is a "fake" State that has no right to be a member of the African Union. Mohammed VI said so himself as he commemorated the 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the 'Green March' (when the Saharawi territory was snatched from Spain). In that same occasion the King also stated that Morocco is interested in playing its role in Africa, that it has "astonishing" support to join the AU, that Western Sahara has an "irrefutable" Moroccan identity and that there is no possibility of Morocco ever giving up on its "legitimate rights".

Surely time, the persuasive power of money and the subtle diplomatic work involved will bring their fruits for Morocco. Internationally speaking, the RASD was recognized by 85 countries in 2008; now they are down to a mere 40. Their international support is waning.

On top of that, RASD is neither a member of the UN (by which it was tagged "non-autonomous territory") nor of the Arab League, the Organization for the Islamic Conference or the Union of Maghreb. The RASD has failed to be recognized by both important nations and permanent members of the Security Council. Their last bastion is the African Union.

Clearly, the amount of international support that a nation receives is directly proportional with the benefits that derive internationally from such support and recognition. Unfortunately, the Saharawi are a small State (officially 500 thousand individuals, but possibly no more than 200 thousand) with no resources (its phosphate mines are controlled by Morocco) and scarce strategic importance. All of these elements ease Rabat's task of doing away with the RASD.

The only strength of the Saharawi is that they are a people who have been stripped of their land and, through subterfuges and prevarications, have been prevented from holding a referendum on self-determination to this day. It is a matter of principle.

### **What does the UN do?**

Since 1991 the MINURSO, the UN mission stationed in Western Sahara, has tried to organize the referendum mentioned above. Vetoes on both sides stalled the production of a list of voters and there exists no civil registry. The Saharawi are a nomadic people that tend to blend in – because of their language – with the tribes of Mauritania. Also, Morocco's ostracism tries to change the local demographic picture through the displacement of their own people in Saharawi territory. Nevertheless, the presence of the UN has proved to be a hindrance to Morocco's aims.

In March, Secretary General Ban Ki Moon traveled to Western Sahara and said Morocco was carrying out an "occupation" of the territory. Ban Ki Moon then added that the Saharawi situation is a "forgotten humanitarian tragedy". Morocco reacted to these statements by kicking 80 UN officials working for MINURSO out of the country.

Last April, while renewing the MINURSO mandate for another year, there were talks of working to reduce violations of human rights in the region. Initially, there was supposed to be an official UN investigation on Western Sahara, then France stepped in and softened the approach of the Security Council.

Morocco feels very uncomfortable when they sit in the defendant's dock.

In 2013, when the USA backed a proposal to monitor human rights in Western Sahara, Morocco unilaterally suspended joint military drills with the Americans.

In February 2014, when France wanted to investigate torture accusations against the head of Morocco's security Service (the Direction Générale de la Surveillance du Territoire – DGST), Abdel Latif Ammouchi, Morocco immediately suspended their judicial cooperation with France.

### **A tolerated regime**

But everybody loves Morocco. Mohammed VI's Islam is moderate, open, of Malikite school, therefore connected to the African Sufi tradition. The role of Morocco in the African and Arab world is desirable, sought after and relished. Not to mention that Mohammed VI lately re-opened diplomatic relations with Iran for the first time since 2009.

After the 2014 'misunderstanding', France went back to being Rabat's central ally, especially in the UN Security Council. Relationships with Spain are satisfactory since 2003 and, despite a closed border between the two nations, Morocco and Algeria are speaking, albeit with alternating fortune, since 1988. Even Israel, with whom diplomatic relations had been severed in the year 2000, seems to be closer today.

With their 2010 and 2013 accords, Nato started a one-on-one cooperation with Morocco, making it an external member of the Organization. At this point, whether there be violations of human rights, the abusive occupation of Western Sahara or systematic opposition against any and all solution to the Saharawi issue, is irrelevant. Nobody cares any longer.

After all, the 53-year-old Moroccan monarch is also cherished for defusing the domino effect of the so-called 'Arab Spring' by approving a constitutional reform. Nowadays

Morocco is governed by a moderate Islamic party called the Party for Justice and Development (PJD). Unluckily, the country is not rid of problems connected to Islamic terror. Various Moroccan cells of the ISIS and of Al Qaida were uncovered and dismantled of late.

Among the ranks of the ISIS' Caliph there fight roughly 1500 Moroccan volunteers, 300 of which in Libya. With the approaching military defeat of the ISIS, many of them will attempt to return to Morocco. Last May, the ISIS had even threatened to strike the country. After all, Morocco represents one of the few examples of moderate Islamic nations around.

### **But is there a solution?**

If Morocco solves the Saharawi problem, which has been conditioning that nation's policy for over 40 years, it will have removed one of its greatest weaknesses in foreign policy. One option that Rabat could choose is to let the African Union negotiate with the Saharawi, offering them limited local control in exchange for the recognition of Morocco and the annexation of Western Sahara. Therefore to go from a de facto situation (being that the territory is already occupied) to a de iure one - one that is in accordance with the law. If it were so, the RASD would have no reason to exist anymore.

The above solution could be viable if the next President of the African Union, due to be elected in January 2017, will be favorable to it. The Moroccan lobby is already at work to make sure that he is. Senegal and Rwanda are the first, enthusiastic, supporters of the plan.

One last element that must be accounted for is the Polisario liberation movement. Its Secretary General, Mohamed Abdulaziz, who was highly respected and had always struggled to prevent a reprise of the fighting after the 1991 peace deal, died last May. Now the rage and frustration of the Saharawi youths (70% of the refugees stationed in the camps are under 20 years of age) find no hurdles in their path. Notwithstanding, when Abdulaziz died, Algeria declared an official week of mourning. It shows that their support of the Saharawi plight is still strong.