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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IRANIAN ELECTIONS

On the coming 19th of May Iran will hold presidential elections.

Even in a theocratic system such as the Iranian one, where the opinions of the Supreme Guide of the Revolution, Ali Khamenei, are highly valued, and where the power of the Council of the Guardians of the Revolution, who can reject some candidacies, are influential, the election of the President is nonetheless based on the people's preferences. That is, they vote and decide. Under this aspect, the Iranian system is to be considered "democratic".

The Challenge lies in the two souls of the country: the moderates (or reformists) and the conservatives. The former are for the democratization of the internal system and for a more relaxed foreign policy; the latter intend to reinforce theocracy and to challenge the rest of the world. In fact, the Iranian conservatives, especially on the internal level, support the role of the Supreme Guide, uphold the values of the Iranian revolution and the religious principles that inspired it.

While presidents are elected in a democratic manner – on the internal level – elections are nonetheless conditioned by international relationships: the threat represented by Israel, the USA and the fight against the Sunni world and Saudi Arabia have the power to induce the Iranian electorate to vote for one party rather than the next. Therefore the verbal threats of US President Trump, the declared will to renegotiate the nuclear deal and the reiterated economic sanctions against Iran are all elements that could sway voter preferences to the radical area.

Presently, the main representative of the moderate wing is the current President Hassan Rouhani who is running for a second term. His candidacy appears to have found support throughout the Iranian moderate panorama. Rouhani's name is prestigious, he is highly considered and is therefore the most authoritative candidate as of today.

On the opposite front, that of the conservatives, there hasn't emerged any prestigious figure. The conservatives still haven't reached an agreement on the name of their candidate, although the contenders are already in the race. In December the former Minister of Health, Marzieh Vahid Dastjerde, founded the "Popular Front of Revolutionary Forces" but fell short of uniting the conservatives.

Former President Ahmadinejad, who was told by Guide Khamenei to avoid being a candidate, decided instead to support the candidacy of his former vice, Hamid Baghaei,

possibly in an attempt to interfere in the country's political events through a proxy candidate.

The same is true of one of the former negotiators of the nuclear treaty, Saeed Jalili. He is also a conservative and he decided – despite suggestions not to do so – to run as an independent.

Even the Speaker of the Parliament, Ali Larjani, also a conservative, was critical of Dastjerde's initiative. In other words, it's everyone against everyone in the conservative camp.

Although the conservative front currently appears divided, it has a majority in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (the Parliament, that was renewed last year), in the Assembly of Experts (the body that designates and replaces the Supreme Guide) and in the Council of the Guardians of the Revolution (the ones selecting the candidates). Therefore, the outcome of the coming elections is anything but certain.

In addition to all this, the elections will also be influenced by the opinion of Khamenei, who acts as a referee but is not always impartial.

In the Iranian system, the Supreme Guide always has the last word on affairs of the State. His criticism of Rouhani two months ago for underachieving in the economic sector, especially with regards to investments and unemployment, did not pass unnoticed. His criticism was reiterated on the past 20th of March, when he cited the suffering of the many poor. Is Khamenei siding with the conservatives? Substantially, yes. Possibly in an attempt to boost the scarce chances of the conservative wing in the coming presidential elections.

Rouhani also fears that some State apparatuses could try to interfere in the presidential elections. He mentioned so much on February 25, when he specifically pointed his finger at the judicial system, the Armed Forces, the security forces and the improper use of State funds. Rouhani's statements sound like an admonishment based on founded suspicion. In fact, during the 2009 elections there had been attempts to manipulate the vote on the part of the conservatives to facilitate the victory of Ahmadinejad.

Behind it all lies the conflicting relationship with the Council of the Guardians and their head, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati. Rouhani is therefore trying to lay claim to the administrative control of the elections, while he would like to limit the Guardians to a mere supervisory role.

Rouhani is also lacking the prestigious backing of a figure like the Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, who died in January, and who was the element of connection and mediation with the establishment and a point of reference for the unity of the moderates. Rafsanjani played a decisive role after the 2009 demonstrations against the alleged manipulation of elections following the re-election of Ahmadinejad which had led to the arrest of Hossein Mousavi and of Medhi Karroubi and to the persecution of the moderate wing. In a separate incident, Rafsanjani's daughter, Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, a well-known activist for human rights, was arrested in March and sentenced to 6 months in prison for offending the judicial power.

Apart from Rouhani, the moderate wing counts several emerging personalities like Hassan Khomeini, 44, nephew of the founder of the Iranian revolution, Rohullah Khomeini, who ran for a seat last year in the Assembly of Experts but who was rejected by the Council of Guardians due to his scarce knowledge of Islamic law. Yet there are also representatives of the conservative field who do not like the idea that their side be administered by political extremists. Rouhani himself had been active in the conservative field. Rouhani hopes that the young Khomeini, thanks to his prestigious last name and to his close ties with Khamenei, can fill in the mediation role left vacant by Rafsanjani's death.

Despite the interference of the theocratic system, the Iranian presidential elections are based on popular vote and support. This has allowed for both reformists (Mohammed Khatami in 1997 and 2001 and Rouhani in 2013) and conservatives (Ahmadinejad in 2005 and 2009) to fill the office of President. So far, none of them were denied a second term by Iranian voters.

An important element of Iranian elections is its rate of participation: when it is high, it usually favors reformists, otherwise it favors conservatives.

Effects on foreign policy

The next 4 years of Iranian internal and foreign policy depend on the winner of the presidential elections. There are many controversies and crisis zones in the Middle East that could blow up if they are approached with a radical mindset. The election of a conservative, whoever he may be, could generate further struggles and wars. Not to mention the differences with the neighboring Sunni monarchies.

The latest meeting of the Arab League (of which Iran is not a member) in Amman on March 29 was focused on Iran; its faults and responsibilities were listed in 15 detailed points (interference in Bahrain, the attack against the Saudi embassy in Tehran, the occupation of the islands in the Persian Gulf, interference in Syria, support of terrorism, etc.)

When Rafsanjani was alive, he was very close to the now defunct Saudi King Abdullah. All the while he managed to force Khamenei and the conservative wing on a more moderate stance. Today, Iranian politics is nowadays lacking this mediating figure.

In addition to all this, there is the controversy with the USA which seems to have been worsened by the election of Donald Trump. Rouhani could make the difference, seen his preceding experience in the negotiations for the nuclear treaty. Even there, Rafsanjani had played a secretive role in the mediation with the Americans.

Effects on interior policy

The Iranian political system needs to be further democratized and this can only happen if the role of the Shiite clergy, supported by the conservatives, is diminished. Even in this respect, Rouhani, if he will be re-elected, will be hindered by Rafsanjani's absence. With his great charisma and the role he played in the Iranian revolution, Rafsanjani could afford to negotiate and sometimes clash openly with Khomeini then and with Khamenei now. He

firmly believed in economic liberalism; he could confront the all powerful Pasdaran and at the same time unite the moderate part of the country. Rafsanjani was also one of the main sponsors of Rouhani's candidacy in 2013.

What can happen if Rouhani wins

Although they are less powerful than they used to be, in the 2016 elections the conservatives managed to hold on to the majority in parliament and in the Assembly of Experts. The conservative current still has the power to condition or block, according to its needs, the activity of a moderate president such as Rouhani. This circumstance makes his initiatives in the economic sector, regardless of Khamenei's criticism, subordinated to the approval of parliament, which controls the balance of State.

Another element that could hinder economic reforms is the fact that the State budget, or at least the part regarding the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran), is not within the jurisdiction of the President.

Another limitation to the President and to his reforms is represented by the right of veto of the Council of the Guardians on any legislation if they believe that such legislation doesn't reflect constitutional 'requisites'. Both parliament, the Assembly of Experts and the Council of the Guardians are hostile to Rouhani. Not to mention the tense relationship he has with the head of the judicial system, the Ayatollah Sadegh Amini Larijani.

Even if Rouhani is re-elected, it doesn't mean that he will have the strength to change the country, because the veto power of the various theocratic groups within the Iranian institutions will be able to block any and all reforms, especially if they are aimed at democratizing the country.

Despite all of these limitations, the Iranian President still presides the Supreme Council of National Security and is therefore responsible for security and defense policy. The nuclear deal (the renowned "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action") was negotiated by Rouhani and lies within his jurisdiction, as does foreign policy.

But what if Rouhani loses and someone from the radical wing is elected? What then? Currently, seen the conflicting relationship with the USA, such possibility could be very dangerous for the precarious stability of the entire Middle East.

A CASE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN TERRORISTS

Over the past few years, several international analysts have dedicated time and resources to profiling terrorists. They wondered what attracted and convinced a huge mass of individuals to become combatants in the seemingly desperate enterprise known as the Caliphate led by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Religious factors, a hope for a better future, poverty and marginalization are among the most common motivations. A fascination for a divine design for a marginalized youth in countries run by autocratic and corrupt regimes. The individuals volunteering for ISIS came from all over the world and shared the same reason for going to fight.

There are no clear figures on the number of volunteers that have reached Syria or Iraq. Overall, some 70 thousand people have joined ISIS and other militant groups in the Middle East. Some 30 thousand of them were foreigners. Out of the latter lot, over 4 thousand were Europeans, of which 1.500 from France, 8/900 from the UK, 7/800 from Germany, 600 Belgians, 350 Austrians and 110 from Italy. To those who took the step to travel to the Middle East, we have to add those radicals that have not left their countries of origin.

What is more striking is that the process of radicalization took place in Europe, where human rights are respected, civil liberties, religious tolerance are granted and corruption is not as widespread as in Arabic or Muslim countries. Hence, the European Muslims represent, or appear to represent, a sociological contradiction that is hard to interpret or classify. And if we fail to understand the causes that push and motivate someone to become a fanatic and, at a later stage, a terrorist, we will not be capable of finding a cure for a chronic social disease. Preventing radicalization is a challenge for both security forces and politicians. Otherwise our analysis will be limited only by physical appearance – a long beard, a hijab and so forth – or a search for the 17 factors US authorities have identified in potential terrorists. The so-called “stress factors” include: late arrival at the check-in desk, excessive yawning, trembling or distress, a clean shaved and thus pale face, no direct eye contact, fast blinking of the eyes, excessive sweating and so forth.

Both the foreign fighters and those who stay share common values and ideology, but differ in terms of personal involvement. While the first are ready to take the decisive step to become militants, the latter develop religious fanaticism and social hate without carrying out any crime. These differences disappear once the Muslim that chooses not to go fight in the Middle East becomes a lone wolf. The attacks in London, Paris and Brussels prove that.

Stereotypes don't help

Unlike what people generally believe, an individual that turns into a terrorist in Europe is not necessarily from a poor working class, jobless, uneducated, socially marginalized and thus frustrated, with psychological or psychiatric problems that are the result of traumatic events in his/her life. At least, this is not the dominant pattern. Statistically, the opposite is true: terrorists are middle class, they have a job and a profession (although in some cases he is a student, or unemployed), they are married and have kids. Sometimes they are divorced, or single, or engaged when they are younger. The average age is between 20 to

35 years. In the majority of cases the terrorist is a male, while women represent a mere 17%. Individuals that we would deem marginalized are the minority. Most of these people have a university degree (25%), a high school diploma (40%), while only 15% is illiterate or uneducated.

A dominant trait is the Arabic origin, generally Algerian, Tunisian or Moroccan. A second or third generation immigrant who lives in urban areas. Muslim converts are a minority. Most of them also have dual nationality: the country of origin and their host country.

The path to radicalism

ISIS propaganda on the internet and social networks has had a great impact on the most gullible individuals. Subliminal messages, a religious and patriot mix, and divine inspiration convinced many to join the cause. The indoctrination starts through friends, relatives, mosques, during a detention in jail and, only at a later stage, when the emotional process has evolved, does the actual recruitment by Jihadists or Salafists actually take place.

Living in a Muslim community, often isolated in a ghetto, allows the individual to absorb his social and family identity in an overreaching religious context. Then, depending on how deep the message has gone, the radicalized individual decides to leave, stay or stage a terrorist attack at home.

Social marginalization

The unemployment rate among immigrants is higher if compared to the rest of the European population. One out of four terrorists that have staged attacks in Europe also spent jail time for offenses unrelated to terrorism. But this still fails to explain why a European Muslim, maybe from a second or third generation of immigrants, decides to become a fanatic first and then a terrorist.

There are a number of psychological factors to take into account. The son of a Muslim immigrant living in Europe embodies a contradiction: a family with its own culture, traditions, values and duties and the outside world. The individual thus faces an identity crisis and is often incapable of enriching his personality with external influences. When he finds himself a foreigner in the world around him, he chooses to go back to his parents' culture of origin. And when this happens, religion is the key element in refusing and contrasting the culture of the host country.

In other terms, religion isn't a cultural tool anymore, but rather the conduit for frustration, rancor and hate. This is when the path to radicalization begins. This explains why, in a recent poll, only a third of the 3.5 million British Muslims is ready to report an Islamic terrorist to the police. Only a third is willing to condemn a terrorist attack and over 1 out of 5 British Muslims is in favor of Sharia law. Namely, over a million British citizens support terrorism.

A bleak future

It is seemingly contradictory to find people still willing to carry out terrorist attacks in the name of the ISIS when the defeat of the Caliphate is closer. The so-called Islamic State has focused its fight in the Middle East against the Shia apostates, rather than against the Christians. The lone wolf in Europe is doing the exact opposite.

This implies that a military defeat of the ISIS will not put an end to Islamic terrorism in Europe. In fact, the opposite could be true. The religious utopia linked to the founding of an Islamic State was part of an irrational dream that overcame all odds. Fighting in the name of such a high ideal, through a bold terrorist act, simply raises the stakes. And turn martyrdom into a cherished prize. Terrorism is part of an asymmetric struggle, it can strike against anyone and anywhere, follows irrational patterns, and the symbolic nature of the action prevails over the actual damage inflicted. This makes terrorism extremely hard to eradicate. Europe is facing a long battle.

Of the estimated four thousand Europeans that have joined Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, 30% will return home. Some of them will be arrested or sanctioned, while others will get away with it. They will be able to display their military experience: they're heroes who've fought a war. Once home, they will join local radical groups and help increase the level of extremism within their communities. By doing so, the ISIS propaganda machine to recruit or radicalize will become useless, because the contagion has begun. Between 2015 and 2016 around 14 terrorist attacks have struck Europe. And they could be more in the future.

RUSSIA'S PEACE INITIATIVE IN ASTANA AND THE FUTURE OF SYRIA

The talks that opened on January 23, 2017 in Astana, in Kazakhstan, reflect the current military and political power brokers in the Middle East. The lead role: Russia. They are the broker in the Syrian crisis. Moscow decided who would participate in the negotiations and who would not. Supporting roles: Turkey and Iran. Then come the other players, including the UN. The United Nations' representative, Staffan de Mistura, is basically doing what he is told.

A number of other actors have been invited to attend: the United States, France, the UK and the EU. Being polite doesn't mean they are meant to actually play any role in the talks. The other participants include the warring parties: a delegation from the Syrian government and members of about 50 armed groups. The official delegation is led by Bashar Jafari, Permanent Representative of Syria at the UN.

The oppositions

Opposition groups are headed by Mohammed Alloush, the leader of a Salafist group financed by Saudi Arabia, Jaysh al-Islam, who is opposed to ISIS and is very strong in the outskirts of Damascus. Beside him is a former Syrian General who defected, Assad al Zoubi, and George Sabra, a Greek-Orthodox Christian who heads the Syrian National Council (SNC), a Turkey-based coalition of opposition groups that was running a shadow government in exile. The SNC had refused to take part in the Geneva talks, while Alloush had walked out in 2016. Christians have been generally pro-Assad, while the SNC also feature the Turkish-supported Muslim Brotherhood, who has always been at odds with the Alawites. The fact that these people were not part of UN-led talks says a lot.

The only opposition groups that have been left out are the radical Islamic factions labeled as terrorist, i.e. ISIS and Fatah al Shan, the former Nusra Front linked to Al Qaeda. Despite the US support, the Syrian Kurdish factions were not invited because of Turkish opposition, as were the Lebanese Hezbollah. Unlike in the past, Syrian opposition doesn't only include groups in exile, but also armed factions on the ground. This is a step in the pragmatic direction.

Closed doors and indirect talks

Opposition groups refuse to sit at the same table with the Syrian government, whom they claim is responsible for violating the truce that began on December 30, 2016. The cessation of hostilities was decided and imposed by the Russians. While it is still unclear whether the Astana talks will produce any results, it is an achievement that any negotiations are taking place at all. At a time when the government in Damascus is at its best: Aleppo has fallen and the opposition is in shreds.

Six years of civil war, almost 1 million dead, 11 million refugees or IDPs make any peace initiative difficult to impose. And if we were to look for an actor strong enough to dictate the terms of peace, that would be Russia. The failure or success of the talks will depend on Moscow's capabilities. There are no alternatives, since every round of negotiations in

Astana is followed by another session in Geneva. The UN is basically left to play a supporting role.

Unsolved issues

One of the major outstanding issues is the survival of the Syrian State as we know it. The divide between the Alawites and the Sunni opposition is so deep that, at least in the short term, any peaceful reconciliation seems unattainable. Too much blood and violence has been spilled by both communities. Could we envisage a federalist government in Syria with internationally-protected regional entities? Potentially yes, if it wasn't for Turkey's hostility to any solution that includes self-rule for Syrian Kurds.

The problem lies in finding a solution that will appease both the warring factions and neighboring countries. After Turkey, Iran is another country trying to influence the balance of power in the region by supporting Shia-led regimes. Tehran's hostility has prevented the inclusion of Saudi Arabia in the talks. But Riyadh will soon benefit from Russian and Turkish sponsorship and be part of the talks.

The survival of the Assad regime could be the price to pay for Syria's stability. Russia has never clearly stated its intentions, one way or the other. All the Russians want is a favorable regime in Damascus, with or without the Assads.

An ongoing process

We're currently at the third round of talks in Astana. The delegations continue to refuse direct meetings with the Syrian regime and no joint statement has been signed. The lack of any concrete progress comes after Russia has agreed to: suspend bombardments, release and exchange prisoners, send humanitarian aid and put a stop to sieges in several rebel-held areas.

Russia, Iran and Turkey have created a joint monitoring group to support the respect of a fragile truce between the parties and that does not include terrorist groups. The ceasefire has been violated by the Syrian army several times: they attack both the rebels participating in Astana and those who are not. This means Damascus is not yet willing to negotiate. In other words, the more time Russia will grant Assad to strengthen its position, the more unlikely a speedy success to the Astana talks.

Presently the regime controls from 45 to 50% of Syrian territory, the armed opposition groups 10%, the Kurds from the YPG 15-20% and ISIS the remaining 30%. The starting point of the negotiations has been the concept of preserving the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria. Assad has made it clear that he won't accept any exceptions. With the 2014 "elections" Bashar al Assad's mandate has been extended until 2021. By then he will be stronger than what he is now.

The December 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2254 asked for a multicultural Syria, with a new Constitution and free elections. All those propositions have never seen the light. Nor have the peace initiatives that followed: Arab League, French President Nicolas Sarkozy with his Friends of Syria, the so-called Vienna process, the Iranian attempt via the

Non Aligned Movement, the Lausanne meetings and so forth. Astana is currently the only open option left.