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SYRIA: HUMAN RIGHTS WHEN NEEDED

In 2014, a man called “Caesar” goes to Washington and meets the Republican senator John McCain and the former US ambassador at the United Nations Samantha Power.

“Caesar”, who still uses this pseudonym to avoid reprisals against his family, is a former Syrian military photographer. His job was to shoot pictures of the people who died during detention in Syrian camps and prisons. Every corpse was cataloged, photographed and assigned a number for reference. Some of the corpses in his pictures show evident signs of torture, while others had evidently died of want and famine. They were photographed, assigned a convenient cause of death, archived and buried in mass graves, unbeknownst to their families. Detention without rules, trials without appeals, extorted confessions and unlimited death sentences were the rule of law in Syria. All one needed to be arrested and made to disappear was a tip off or a slight suspicion.

The photographs

Caesar escaped from Syria in 2013 carrying a photographic archive comprised of 27.000 photographs, including pictures depicting dead minors. Cutaneous wounds, signs of burns from electroshock, enucleation of the eyes, signs of strangulation, fractured limbs, bullet holes and finishing wounds on the nape, lacerated abdomens, signs of chemical burns on the skin and of whipping: a long list of brutalities supported by irrefutable evidence.

Caesar, who was aided in fleeing the country by the opposition, was tasked with showing to the world the genocide of the Syrian population on the part of Bashar al Assad’s bloodthirsty regime. Unfortunately, the world seemed to look elsewhere.

Ignored evidence

In Washington, Caesar underwent a closed-door interview by the US Committee on Foreign Affairs. The audition was in the presence of the Committee’s chairman Ed Royce, its 30 members and several representatives of human rights organizations. Former prosecutor David Crane, who was the first to write about the photographs, was also there. All of the people present asked questions, looked at the evidence and became aware of the facts. They even drew a parallelism with the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis during the second world war.

Caesar was especially supported by a US senator whom, during his experience in the Vietnam war, suffered over six years of torture and abuse: John Sydney McCain. Then-President Obama, on the other hand, refused to meet him.

The reason for the refusal was the 2014 situation on the ground: The ISIS was growing strong; they had conquered Mosul and represented the single greatest danger in the spread of terror and the destabilization of the Middle East. The US President of the time knew full well that the fall of the Syrian regime could boost the expansion of the ISIS. Obama had not forgotten the events that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and that of Gheddafi's in Libya. He did not wish to repeat the same mistake in Syria.

He was, of course, well aware of the brutality of Bashar al Assad, but preferred not to raise the issue. He chose to protect the USA's military interests over the respect of human rights.

Caesar also met with the FBI, which had already received copies of his photographs. If the US could find, among the pictures, a person with a US passport or someone related to a US citizen, they could have brought the issue to the International Criminal Court. The FBI, however, refused to offer their help both in identifying the individuals depicted in the photographs and in using the Bureau's database. They did admit, however, that the photographs were authentic, but they did so after a year's time (to put these events in their context, at the time the US were negotiating a nuclear treaty with Iran and raising human rights issues could have compromised such negotiations, since Iran, together with Russia, was one of Syria's staunchest allies).

France raises an eyebrow

Unlike the reluctant and embarrassed Americans, the French government, intellectuals and public opinion reacted to Assad's brutalities. On top of that, Amnesty International published witness accounts confirming Caesar's photographic evidence. The former French ambassador in Damascus, Eric Chevalier, a witness of the Hama killings, also managed to meet the Syrian photographer. The various departments of the French foreign ministry were mobilized and a report for the UN Security Council was drafted. The 15 members of the Council were shown the pictures and France demanded that the case be brought to the International Criminal Court. However, an International Criminal Court proceeding would have required an authorization by the UN Security Council if the country involved – as is the case with Syria – is not a signatory of the Rome Statute (the treaty that establishes the ICC).

The other nations look the other way

As expected, the Russians and Chinese refused to participate. The former to save their Mid-Eastern ally from facing a trial; the latter to respect a so-called principle of non-interference with the internal affairs of other nations. France attempted to convince Russia by including the crimes of the Syrian opposition's armed forces in the report but on June 22, 2014, the Security Council rejected the French proposal: 13 favorable votes against 2, Russia and China, of course.

The periodic reports of a special investigative commission on Syria created in 2011 by the High Commissioner for Human Rights were not sufficient to form an international front against a form of genocide that is ongoing in Syria as we speak. Even the well-documented accusations that the Syrian army used chemical weapons against the rebels met deaf ears.

The other witnesses

Is Caesar's account the only valid testimony of the Syrian regime's misdeeds? In fact, no. The witness accounts gathered in time are many but Caesar, unlike the others, has photographs to prove his claims. But there is also another individual who experienced various Syrian prisons during his 13 years of captivity and who decided to tell his experience in a book ("The shell"). His name is Mustafa Khalifa and he was arrested while returning home from France, where he was living, because of a tip off. Khalifa, who now lives in exile, was not only a witness to the horrors of the Syrian lagers but also a direct victim of the regime's tortures. During his captivity, he experienced mock trials, uncured epidemics, malnutrition, continuous abuses and executions. He was contacted and interviewed by various organizations and by French authorities before his case was swept under the rug by countries that do not want to see or hear what goes on in Syria.

But on May 15 this year, the Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East, Stuart Jones, during a press conference, denounced the construction of a crematorium in the military prison of Saydnaya, near Damascus. A huge prison that was already the object of a specific report by Amnesty International. Photographs of this new structure were shown, genocidal aims evoked; again many made the parallel with the crematoriums of the Nazis.

What now?

The first question that springs to mind is whether or not the evidence produced by the US Department of State is more irrefutable than the accounts offered by Caesar, Mustafa Khalifa and the other witnesses of the regime's misdeeds since 2011. It is quite clear that the DoS report confirms the validity of the previous accounts.

The reaction of the Syrian regime to the publication of the photographs is another indicator that the accounts are true.

Seen that keeping archives of the deaths of detainees is a high-risk endeavor (especially if these are then shown abroad); seen that the number of these deaths, weather through torture or hanging, continues to grow (Amnesty International claims that since 2011, in the Saydnaya prison alone, roughly 15.000 individuals have died), the regime has probably adopted a more cautious approach: no more archives, no more mass graves, only crematory ovens that leave no traces.

It is paradoxical that the aim of Caesar and Mustafa Khalifa in making their stories public was to stop the violence perpetrated by the regime. The effort produced the opposite result: a more functional way of getting rid of thousands of corpses.

Now that the ISIS militias are nearing defeat, only now, do the US find the systematic violations of human rights by the Syrian regime interesting. Not because Obama, then-president and Nobel-prize winner, stepped down and was replaced by Donald Trump, but because the situation on the ground has changed.

The new Middle-eastern theater

Once the ISIS is defeated, the new problem in the stabilization of the Middle East is connected to the survival or defeat of the Syrian regime. Until May 15, world media spoke solely of the brutality of Al Baghdadi's militia, now they speak of the regime's brutality as

well. Both contenders have used violations of human rights extensively. The only difference is that the ISIS was willing to publicize the circumstance to scare their enemies while the Syrian regime tried to hide such violations. Notwithstanding, the brutality of one side matched the other's both in quantity and quality.

It is also worth noting that the accusations by the US come at the eve of the Geneva negotiations, which are already conditioned by the Astana talks, where Russia took the upper hand. Perhaps the aim of the US is to influence the negotiations. Clearly, if Assad's regime remains in power, the traces of these violations will be wiped away forever, save for the witness accounts of the few, lucky, individuals that survived the regime's lagers. Whether or not the prison of Saydnaya is using a crematory oven to get rid of the bodies (the regime said that the US claim is "Hollywood-like") is not that important after all.

After five long years of bloody civil war, if the Syrian regime is allowed to remain at the helm, the complete genocide of the opposition is likely to go on stage.

Opportunistic opposition

The most striking element in all of this is that the violations of human rights are emphasized or ignored according to an opportunistic agenda. Caesar, Mustapha Khalifa, the 80 witnesses produced by Amnesty International and the NGO reports that systematically denounced abuses have become a political instrument that ignores the suffering of many poor souls.

Extrajudicial executions; inhumane conditions in crowded cells, mostly underground; mock trials; roughly 50 executions per day; all of it becomes either important or is forgotten and the victims are but a number. It is rumored that the crematoriums were functioning since 2013. Then why did the US authorities decide not to disclose their existence until May 2017?

Assad was useful then; now he is made to be a twenty-first century Hitler.

Definitely a striking case of truth manipulation.

KOSOVO AND THE BALKANS: A FERTILE GROUND FOR ISLAMIC TERRORISM

We are often inclined to think that Islamic terrorism stems from the Middle East, and from there to elsewhere across the world, including Europe. But if we take a closer look at the past 25 years, it is in the Balkans that the sectarian violence between muslims and christians, be they catholic or orthodox, has been concentrated. In fact, the bloody aftermath of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the path to independence of the States that were once part of the communist country was both an ethnic and religious conflict.

Now independent countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina have a predominant muslim population – over 50% – while relevant Islamic minority groups are also present in Macedonia (40%) and Montenegro (20%). Kosovo's NATO-led secession from Serbia in 2008 has created another de-facto muslim country, since 90% of Kosovars are muslims, just like in neighboring Albania, where the followers of the Prophet are over 70% of the population.

During communism, Islam in the Balkans was definitely not radical, but it evolved after the outbreak of the conflict in the 1990s. During the war, Islamic brigades came to the rescue of Bosnia. The same happened a decade later in Kosovo. Saudi money helped build over 800 mosques in Bosnia, along with koranic schools. What was once a moderate vision of Islam soon became inspired by Wahabism. It should come as no surprise that over 350 Bosnians have joined ISIS, the seventh country in the world in terms of pro-capita contribution. Kosovo supplied a similar number of combatants to al Baghdadi, becoming the fifth country for pro-capita support. Other countries in the area have also sent jihadists to Syria and Iraq: 150/200 from Albania, 100/150 from Macedonia, while Montenegro and Serbia have only contributed a handful of combatants.

Terrorism in the Balkans is definitely more dangerous, as it doesn't fit the stereotype of the dark-haired bearded Arab or of a woman wearing a burka. A caucasian looking individual, a Slav, can mislead authorities and induce them to underestimate the threat. The arrest of a cell of Kosovan jihadists ready to carry out an attack in Venice in March 2017 shows how close to home the menace is. Even Khalid Masoud, the man who attacked Westminster in London, is allegedly of Kosovar descent and was radicalized while working in Saudi Arabia. The fact that the Balkans are part of Europe, with some countries member of the EU or about to join, implies that the movements of potential terrorists can strike to the heart of the old continent.

The rising terrorist threat has led a number of countries in the region to approve a series of anti-terrorism laws. Kosovo has one of the most advanced legislations and has received funding and training from the US, while the NATO contingent in the north of Kosovo helps local police monitor the border with Serbia. Kosovar law has set up a special Attorney's office and a police directorate to investigate terrorism. This model was also followed by Macedonia and Albania. At the same time, the Kosovars have released IDs which are hard to forge and set up a mass database which can detect forgeries in airports or along land-borders.

The security threat for Kosovo is linked to both the returning home from the Middle East of radical fighters and the jihadist propaganda at home and its impact on a largely disenfranchised and unemployed local youth. The menace from within has led to the closing down of a series of Islamic associations and the arrest of a number of preachers. However, the penetration of Wahabism is so deep-rooted that, no matter what happens to the ISIS, Kosovar society has already been radicalized. Saudi charities have opened hospitals, provided assistance to families in need, opened over 100 koranic schools and 250 mosques, while the Saudi embassy has at least 140 preachers on its payroll. In the near future, this could make of Kosovo one of the potential sources of Islamic extremism.

After all, the Islamic State's propaganda has frequently referred to Kosovo as one of the caliphate's targets. The threats were formulated by a Kosovar commander, Ridvan Haiqifi, aka Abu Muqatil al Kosovi, in November 2016. Haiqifi was killed in combat. Another Kosovar casualty fighting for ISIS is Lavdrim Muhaxheri. There are also rumors that the UCK, the Kosovo Liberation Army that fought the war of independence against the Serbs, has set up a number of training camps for wannabe jihadists. The paramilitary group has officially been disbanded and branded as "terrorist", but it still benefits from a wide support from local public opinion. And since the conflict with Serbia took a religious twist, the UCK is now closer to Islamic extremism. Yet another case of a nationalist movement, tainted by widespread criminal feats, now fighting for a religion: Islam. Apparently, Islamic radicalization is also widespread inside Kosovo's prisons. All those radical preachers and members of the UCK that have been put in jail have continued their proselytism behind bars.

Before former Yugoslavia dissolved, radical Islamists were coming to fight for the cause from the Middle East and other parts of the world. A brigade made up of volunteers fought alongside the Bosnian muslims. Some of them married local women and became residents. More volunteers have come to Kosovo and Macedonia. With the outbreak of the so-called "Arab Springs", the flow went in the opposite direction. From being exogenous, the phenomenon became endogenous. The risk is that the hundreds of foreign fighters from the Balkans will return once the conflict with the ISIS ends in a defeat.

In places like Bosnia, political Islam goes as far back as the 1930s when a local movement known as the "Muslim Youth" ("Madli Muslemeani") wanted the creation of a great muslim nation in the Balkans. Alija Izetbegovic was one of the members of the movement. He went onto becoming the president of Bosnia during the independence struggle between 1992 and 1996. It was thus inevitable that a war for Islam would attract among the first global foreign fighters, the so-called "Mudzahid", what in the Middle East they call "Mujaheddin", or warriors of the holy war. And once that conflict was over, the Saudi funded King Fahd Cultural Center and Mosque helped spread radical Wahabi Islam in neighboring countries through a network of charities, koranic schools and so forth. If this started off at the end of the 1990s, the radicalization of Kosovo only happens at a later stage, almost a decade later.

Yet, the methodology for the spreading of Wahabi ideology in the Balkans has used the same techniques that the ISIS has employed in the Middle East: publications of magazines

and sermons, wide use of mass media, cyber propaganda. Such a ruthless strategy poured salt in a society that had just gone through a dramatic nationalist and sectarian conflict. The impact of this propaganda is visible today. A recent opinion poll found that 20% of Kosovars, 15% of Bosnian muslims and 12% of Albanians are in favor of the introduction of Islamic Sharia law in their countries. At the same time, 11% of Kosovars, 6% of Albanians and 3% of Bosnians justify the use of violence (including suicide attacks) to defend Islam. Although still limited in numbers, it is pretty evident Europe will have to deal with the negative side-effects the contagion of radical Islam in the Balkans has produced.

GLOBAL ECONOMY: IT'S EVOLUTION, ITS CONTRADICTIONS

Our globalized society lives in a world where information travels at the speed of light, where the internet puts people across the globe in touch, and where causes and effects immediately interact no matter where they are taking place. Communication networks have taken over maritime and land routes. A truly globalized system, in every compartment. There are no more geographic or morphologic limitations. What was once a national crisis or issue is automatically an international problem. Every secret is revealed in the public domain. And all of this thanks to scientific progress.

Economic and financial systems interact and have also become global. Financial globalization implies that the world is the market and that global economy is interdependent and connected with national economies. This has produced: the strengthening of financial and commercial flows; a global manufacturing model that has organized its production beyond national borders. Technological progress is playing a key role, as it reduces both production times and distances for all the goods and services that are produced. And since this is globalized capitalism, production sites will concentrate where the workforce is cheaper and the access to raw materials is easier.

The origins of the phenomenon

Globalization is nothing new under the sun. It's wider meaning takes us back to the dawn of mankind, as people, products, ideas and innovations started spreading across the globe. And while more recently the concept was part of the struggle between communism and liberalism, it's initial focus has always been trade. Throughout history there are numerous examples:

- the roads built by the Roman Empire, a network meant to connect even the remotest angles of the empire;
- the Silk Route linking China to Europe that allowed the spread of knowledge and key products like gunpowder, compasses, pasta and spices;
- Marco Polo's travels East in the 13th century in Asia;
- Venice's commercial empire that developed between the 11th and 16th century and the Hanseatic league in the North Sea between the 13th and 17th century that fully exploited both maritime and land routes to deliver the best product and bring new technologies home. This process was favored by the downfall of the Mongolian Empire (1368) that, until then, had secured the Silk Route. The insecurity on the land pushed the Europeans to go by sea in search for new routes. And this eventually led to the circumnavigation of Africa and the discovery of the Americas.

This period, known as the "First Wave", ended in the second half of the 18th century when the Industrial Revolution came about and Europeans started migrating to the new lands in the Americas and Australia.

The impact of the two World Wars

The two World Wars showed the negative side of globalization. At the end of World War II there was a major shift in global power when the United States took over the UK and became a superpower. The newly found leader shaped a New World Order that had its economic arm in the Bretton Woods system set up in 1944 (IMF and World Bank) and its political arm in the Society of Nations, later United Nations, that moved from Europe to the Americas, from Geneva to New York. Globalization was suddenly reigned in through a number of international institutions, including the International Trade Organization that later became known as the WTO.

The roaring years of globalization

For half a century or so, everything went smoothly. Until November 30, 1999 when world leaders were put under siege while they were negotiating a new global trade deal in Seattle. 40 thousand protests that included blue collars, unions, Ngos and “black blocks” forced the Washington State Patrol’s 81st Brigade to a retreat. Seattle’s Chief of Police resigned and President Bill Clinton was forced to call in the National Guard. Several summit participants were stranded in their hotels and could not even reach the Convention Center where police was spraying teargas on the demonstration. Globalization suddenly faced it’s nemesis: a globalized protest movement that began to stage similar protests all over the world, including in Genova in 2001 where a young Italian, Carlo Giuliani, was shot by a policeman. The rich and the wealthy were forced to meet in the isolated Davos Forums on the Grigioni mountains in the Swiss Alps, their presence watched over by heavily guarded police.

The meeting in Seattle failed because delegations from Africa and Latin America did not sign a trade deal that would have hurt their weak economies, favoring global corporations and stronger economies. Suddenly questions were raised on the economic model imposed by both the IMF and the World Bank: their programs and austerity measures were killing the Third World instead of helping it progress. Globalization became a synonym of post-colonial imperialism. Multinational corporations went under the spotlight for a number of reasons, including their role in the decrease of the salaries and the impact of their activities on the environment. Yet, new trade deals were signed. The latest are the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) and the TTIP (Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership).

The side effects

In fact, globalization has made the wealthy wealthier and the poor poorer. Inequality has increased, both between and within countries. One of the social side-effects is immigration. Terrorism, religious conflicts and the “rich” world’s lack of will to resolve these issues has led to a rebirth of nationalist feelings that perceive globalization’s effects as basically “evil”. Nationalism and isolationism are the cures for a sick global system.

Joseph Stiglitz claims that international trade generates profits which are not equally distributed. One of the forefathers of economics, David Ricardo, claimed profits would be equally shared by all participants in global trade. The delocalization of production, the entrance of China in the WTO alongside the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) has instead concentrated polluting productions in certain areas of the

globe. The exploitation of cheap laborers in “poor” countries has created unemployment in the “rich” ones.

Economist Branko Milanović has highlighted in his “Global Inequality” globalization’s most blatant contradictions. On one hand, it has decreased the distance between the North and the South of the world. On the other, it has made the rich richer and the rest poorer. Angus Deaton adds a personal critique: while the suicide rate of the new poor is on the rise in the US, I, as an academic, benefit from globalization because my services can be sold across the global market.

Back in 1848, in the Manifesto of the Communist Party Karl Marx e Friederich Engels predicted what is happening now to our globalized society. They claimed the decline of capitalism was written in its DNA. Its constant search for new markets would have ultimately led to its self-destruction.

The search for rules

Is there a way to rid globalization of its negative social and economic side-effects?

According to the supporters of economic liberalism, human society is ruled by immutable natural laws. Hence, the only stimulus for man to interact in the economic sphere is personal gain. Thus, the economic system that best adapts to man’s needs postulates free trade and entrepreneurship. In other words, the State should just sit back and watch. In 2005 in the “The World is Flat”, Thomas Friedman foresaw the arrival of “hyper-globalization” and “turbo-globalization”: A conformed global society with no boundaries for international trade.

Other economists, such as Pankaj Ghemawat, are less “enthusiastic”. They claim Friedman’s vision of not taking into account the role played by single nations, their culture and political differences. The proof is in the inversely proportional flow of capitals and people. While one is on virtually unstoppable, so has become the latter, regardless of increased surveillance and obstacles to migrants and refugees. Just as with any other evolution in society, every phenomenon is faced with its opposite.

During the Great Depression in 1929 the State stepped in to guarantee economic stability and assist its people. The Welfare State was created between the two World Wars. Almost a century later, welfare measures are necessary to protect people from wild globalization. A lack of rules is taking countries back to issuing more constraints, while at the same time abandoning the “market will solve this” doctrine. This is the conflict capitalism has fought all along: against the welfare state, against the meddling of the State. The outcome of this struggle will shape the future of mankind.