The Drama of Syria

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Syria, the country known as "the heart of the Middle East" because of its complex and extremely rich history, has become a battlefield. Due to internal oppositions combined with the international interests of the big powers, there has been a political blockade and a military status quo which is increasingly difficult to overcome. Thus, we are helplessly witnessing the destruction of a people whose modern history is dominated by the repression of the Baas Party regime, controlled by the Alawite al-Assad family, who have held power since the 1970s. The Syrian army, at the service of President Bashar al-Assad, is bloodily confronting the opposition, mainly constituted by the Muslim Brotherhood, whose objective is to achieve power in order to enforce the gradual Islamisation of the country.

In Wadi Khaled, a strip of Lebanese territory that enters Syria, among the thousands of refugees frightened away by the military repression of *rais* Bashar al-Assad, I found a group of national army deserters coming from Homs, just a hundred kilometres from the border of Aleppo and Der Ezor, on the other side of the republic. They were occupying a house under construction watched by the neighbours. The deserters, mainly recruits, were waiting for weapons to return to their lands and to fight on the side of the insurgents. During their time in this town in northern Lebanon, the Salafists have imbued them with radical Islamist doctrines. "Now we are more religious," one of the deserters confessed to me while showing a Koran and making the sign of victory with his fingers, "than when we arrived in Wadi Khaled."

In Damascus, the heart of the Arabs, the Pandora's Box of all the complicated conflicts in the Middle East has been brusquely opened. Only a miracle can avoid its Balkanisation, its Iraqisation, its Lebanonisation. Nobody would have imagined a year ago that the regime's confrontation with the diverse opposition forces, divided between those who are determined to topple it at all costs and those who would prefer to accept a compromise that avoids the announced catastrophe of a civil war, would become an increasingly more internationalised conflict. After the failed mediation by the Arab League to achieve a peace agreement, Kofi Annan tried, on behalf of the UN and the Arab League, another uncertain diplomatic initiative to end the violence, establish cessation of hostilities and approach a national dialogue between government and opposition.

Syria is a challenge and a drama. Nobody understands the country because they are unfamiliar with its complex society and difficult history. Damascus, as has so often been written, is the "heart of the Arabs." Syria, with different territorial and political configurations, has always existed, as Egypt has unquestionably existed throughout time. Neither Iraq, Lebanon or Jordan, nor the absolute monarchies of the

Gulf blessed by Allah with oil wealth – long ago Bedouin desert villages –, strongholds of the most obscurantist and retrograde Islamism imposed with its petrodollars in the region, have had a similar history. Who remembers what happened in northern Syria, in Aleppo and in the "dead cities," where Christianity flowered? Who remembers that Syria was at the forefront of the Arab renaissance when it rose up against the domination of the Ottoman Empire and the French mandate that had divided the territory into religious enclaves of murderous identities, such as the Alawite state, the Druze state, the Sunni areas of Damascus and Aleppo? Syria still feels the deepest wound of the Arabs, divided, lost and confronted with bloody fights between Sunnis and Shiites in this time of computer technologies, desperation, an expanding youth population and peoples condemned by the dictates of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

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Charles de Gaulle wrote in his memoirs: "I am going to the complicated East with simple ideas." Today, the complexity of the East thwarts all the theoretical frameworks, and the conflict of Syria tears the international strategies to pieces. The western military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have aggravated the suffering of their martyred peoples and have resulted in scandalous failures. A foreign armed intervention, which would be how the insurgents would win the war against al-Assad's regime, as the Sunni Arab states desire, is cautiously regarded by the governments of the USA, Turkey and Europe, fearing the chaos that would be provoked in Syria and the Middle East. In some of the demonstrations last year in Deraa, banners were waved bearing slogans such as "Death to the Alawites and the Christians in Beirut."

It was 1965 when I travelled as a tourist for the first time to Syria, two years before the Arab-Israeli Six Day War. Damascus was then a very provincial city with only a few hotels such as the Omeyad, the Semiramis or the Catan, on the dirty banks of the Barada, a river's apprentice. I rented a room in Bab Tuma, the Christian neighbourhood in the old walled area of the capital, and this was when I published my first chronicle about Syria.

The army and the Baas Party had carried out their military uprising in 1963, turning around the contemporary history of the country. In 1970, as a correspondent in Beirut, I suffered the first journalistic frustrations in the days of the coup by General Hafez al-Assad, because of the impossibility of obtaining a visa. When finally, thanks to Ambassador Nuño Aguirre de Cárcer, I obtained the precious document, I was arrested in the centre of the capital while photographing some buildings which housed official offices. Syria was a militarised country, with a profusion of *mukhabarats* or secret agents with an impenetrable authoritarian regime, with degrading prisons, which cultivated secrecy and under which nobody dared to speak freely. As Damascus always had a very bad press, Beirut was and still is the best place to report on the events of the prohibited Baasist city.

But I have also seen how Syria, that modest country, with few natural resources and its agriculture and industry, has continued with its social market economy system, first with the construction of its infrastructure from the Tabka dam in the Euphrates to Tartus port or the Homs oil refinery, and later with gradual economic openings. Although this system has enabled a certain modernisation of the privileged classes, it has also worsened the living

conditions of an increasingly young and pauperised population, whose inhabitants in the rural areas have poured into the peripheries of the big cities, especially after the recent catastrophic droughts.

With Bashar al-Assad, the country broke its international isolation and tourism discovered Syria. Unfortunately, this opening without democratic liberties was exploited by his clan of speculators. One million Iraqis have taken refuge in the Syrian republic, frightened off by internal conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites. When the Damascus regime boasted stability and invulnerability with respect to the Arab rebellions, brandishing its nationalism, defence of the Palestine cause and resistance to Israel, the bloodiest conflict and the most violent repression broke out. Meanwhile, the opposition remained firm in its determination to continue its actions until the defeat of Bashar al-Assad, all of which is destroying Syria.

The contemporary history of Syria, like that of Egypt, is the history of the Muslim Brotherhood to achieve power. This organisation, which was founded in Egypt in the 1920s by Hassan al-Banna, embodies the longings, demands and struggles of the majority of the Syrian Muslim population. It was subjugated to the regime of the Baas Party, later of the al-Assad family emerging from the Alawite minority. Its opposition to *rais* Hafez al-Assad, father of the current president, was exacerbated between 1979 and 1982. Before Hama's armed uprising, brutally crushed by the elite army units, the Brotherhood had attempted to assassinate him and carried out several attacks against the military academies in Aleppo, Palmira and Homs, a city, like Hama, in which the Brotherhood has always had many supporters. After Hama's bloody repression in 1982, the Brotherhood was decapitated, pursued and defeated. The Syrian Parliament passed a law through which anyone who formed part of the Muslim Brotherhood was sentenced to death.

When Bashar al-Assad promised reforms in that ephemeral political spring in Damascus, just after coming to power in summer 2000, after the death of his father, the Brotherhood, the first political organisation of the opposition, gained strength in exile, above all in Istanbul and London. This city also hosts the headquarters of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has become the most cited source for establishing the deaths, victims and attacks of the armed forces of the state against the rebels.

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In 2006, the Brotherhood published its "Political Project for the Future of Syria" after another important document distributed in 1980, entitled "Islamic Revolution", in which it declared itself to be in favour of the modern and democratic state of law but with an Islamist vocation, thus rejecting a theocratic regime it classed as totalitarianism. In these documents, which postulate the dialogue between political parties, parliamentary democracy is conceived as the expression of the Islamic concept of shura, which means consultation.

The Brotherhood has sought to adapt to the jurisprudences in force, to the diversity of the political parties of other opposition trends, as shown in its recent document of 26th March 2012. In this, it outlines its post-Bashar al-Assad era programme, while boasting about its civil state project founded on human rights.

In any case, the Muslim Brotherhood does not hide its political project, based on the idea that laws must be subject to progressive Islamisation and cannot contradict the fundamental principles of the sharia. Given these affirma-

tions by the Brotherhood, which has been gaining power through the ballot boxes in Arab countries, shaken up since 2011 by the revolts and insurrections, we must ask if its promises of democracy are real or a way of achieving power. As one of the best specialists on complicated Syria, Michel Seurat, kidnapped and killed in Beirut during the years of terror in the 1980s, wrote, the Muslim Brotherhood is not a herald of modernisation, but we must take into account its wide social audience in Syria. It is the only force of opposition to the regime, with fourteen centuries of history behind it, and the only one that can stand up to it.

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In Syria, the confrontation between Islamism and secularism will be vital for the future of the Middle East. The other opposition groups are incapable of organising and uniting against Bashar al-Assad, who remains strong, thanks especially to his army, his *mukhabarats* or intelligence services, and to a part of the population (the Christian and Druze minorities, above all, who fear the establishment of an Islamic state).

In the current climate of vengeance, fear and settling of scores that goes back to the Hama massacre of 1982, the most radical Sunni groups, the Salafists, most influential in the Free Syrian Army, are incited by the reactionary and rich monarchies of the Gulf. Thus, they exploit the government's loss of control and security in some regions of the country to continue striking hard. The objective is to eliminate the Alawites from the power they believe they usurped for half a century.

It should also be noted that the Syrian republic has become a battlefield between the USA and its Sunni Arab friends, and Iran and its Shiite allies. In this context, Russia and China play a key role in the shaping of a new Middle East that they do not want to abandon to the hands of western powers. There is a paralysing political blockade and military status quo. On both sides, the intransigent parties who do not want to compromise dominate. Therefore, with impotence and anger, we are witnessing the destruction of a great people, the heart of the Middle East.