

Appeasement policy with Iran

An assessment

1. Warmongering and appeasement in the XXth century

To preserve peace, to favour a peaceful action over a violent one in order to attain whatever goal, are surely good political general principles, and the failure to do so has been rightly perceived as one of the biggest dramas of human history.

The First World War, or the Great War as it is known, still appears today as the World's leading historic example of a warmongering dominant attitude that led to a human catastrophe without precedent.

Accustomed to ultimately sort out disputes and rivalries through violent confrontations of a limited scale, the leaders of the major European powers probably did not imagine the scale of death and destruction that this war would lead to.

The horror of seeing millions of young soldiers dying in unspeakable conditions for unspeakable motives definitely marked deeply the whole of a generation. A visit to major battle fields of this war, like Ypres, where hundreds of thousands of human remains are voiceless witnesses of the scale of the tragedy are eloquent reminders of where human barbarity can lead us to.

It is only understandable and to a large extent commendable that the generation who witnessed this tragedy should have become obsessed with preventing its repetition but it is certainly a cruel irony of history that this obsession would turn out to be the main reason why a second World War – where the human slaughter would attain even more horrifying heights – would become inevitable.

After the warmongering, we had the appeasement with consequences that proved to be even more dramatic.

Appeasement is certainly a complex concept. The English language got it from the French via the Normand invaders, and the French, as all of us, got it from the Latin, from peace, an Indo-European term.

As the history of the modern concept of appeasement proves, an obsessive peaceful attitude is not necessarily the best way to prevent aggression and, quite on the contrary, it might be the most direct way to provoke it.

The most famous example of appeasement policy that formatted the concept dates from the Western policy towards Hitler. Its most distinctive feature is the admission – when not the justification – of violence in the name of peace.

The reasoning is normally that we must not overreact to a certain level of violence, as the aggressor will satisfy himself with it and will moderate his attitudes once satisfied. Appeasement, therefore, becomes the approval of violence – that is the opposite of peace – on the grounds that this violence might insure peace in the future.

Once the appeaser crosses this red line – that is, when a twisted or even schizophrenic logic makes the acceptance of unprovoked violence to be an instrument to build peace – a phenomenon of identification with the aggressor starts with unforeseen consequences.

Still thinking of the most obvious and known example of appeasement policy, the West and Hitler, as studied by authors like Kershaw (*Making friends with Hitler*, Penguin,

2005) we can understand how the obsessive will to insure peace with a Villain leads the appeaser into an intellectual acceptance of the aggression and its justification.

The appeasement attitude of most of the British intellectual elite was inseparable of its growing anti-Semitism. Most remarkably, perhaps, was the case of Czechoslovakia. If the public opinion had a clear favourable perception of the Czech authorities before Munich, after Munich, the Czech leadership was more and more depicted as the guilty of, in the very least, stubbornness, and any resistance from it sometimes classified as terrorism.

Other important appeasement symbol was the need to see moderation when there was none. As Kershaw explains, throughout most of the thirties, the general main-stream opinion of the most important British media was that in the Nazi party Hitler was a moderate, the real fanatics being Goebbels or Göring.

Looking retrospectively, it appears that a firm attitude in front of the growing Nazi aggression mood and the non-acceptance of the internal human-rights violations would have been the way to avoid the Second World War tragedy, and that appeasement only made it inevitable.

2. Peace and War in the early XXIst century

Both the murder of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 and the attack on US in September eleven 2001 can be seen as the starting points of a dramatic set of events.

The fact that both of them are normally described as terrorist acts calls our best attention to their tremendous differences.

Whereas the terrorism of 1850 – 1914 targeted specific leaders with specific political goals, modern terrorism targets as much people as possible, regardless of being civilians or military, leaders or normal citizens, children or adults, women or men and uses suicidal techniques.

Bruce Hoffmann in “Inside Terrorism” is a very important book to be read in this context and it is on its basis I made my own definition of modern terrorism (in the hidden invasion of Iraq).

Second, and not least important, a World War was a disproportionate way to answer a murder, whereas the deposition of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that allowed September eleven happening was certainly not a disproportionate act of war.

The main problem was that instead of trying to fully understand the fanatic, suicidal, mass-murder nature of September eleven terrorist act, the Western World refused to understand what it was confronted with, and decided to misuse September eleven to confront a regime that, however dictatorial, was strange to the jihadist phenomenon.

Iraqi Baath regime had nothing to do with this terrorist attack and did not have an active programme of weapons of mass destruction.

There are several issues that come together on the Iraqi drama that are essential to see separately, and this is the inability to do so that most of the times creates unwanted confusion.

Democracy in the Greater Middle East

The first level of discussion is the one on the need to extend to the “Greater Middle East” (GME) the geopolitical principles of Universal democracy that came out of the end of the Berlin wall era.

September eleven demonstrated that the perception of the exceptionalism of the GME either as a mostly Arab or as mostly Muslim geo-cultural region – or perhaps more accurately geo-politically oil region – was a serious mistake.

There was and there is no reason to think that people disdain democracy in the Arab or in the Muslim cultural identities. From this point of view, in spite of the enormous drawbacks of the process, I had no doubt from the moment I first visited Iraq that the Iraqi people wanted democracy.

So, the so-called “idealist school” of thought in the US – in this particular, personified by the former President policy – was in accordance with reality.

Furthermore, I think that most of the present problems of the West in this region have to do with the dominant “realpolitik” attitude for which the relevant criterion was guaranteed access to oil. For the so-called “realists” all sorts of religious fanatics or dictators seemed preferable to democratic leaders if they would co-operate to supply oil.

In other words, in the Greater Middle East, as anywhere else in the World, democracy is the best ally of the West, and the best bet we can make. The short sighted policy of defending immediate interests can be detrimental to these interests in the long run.

Why Iraq

The real questions raised by the intervention in Iraq were however quite different: the first was to know if Iraq was the country to start a democratic revolution in the region, the second was to know if the method to achieve democracy was the most indicated, the third was what were the real motives behind the choice of such a military operation in such conditions.

On the first question, I believe the answer is a resounding No. The country more mature for a democratic revolution was and still is Iran and the country where general conditions could be more favourable for a peaceful evolution with bigger regional consequences was, in my opinion, Egypt.

The arguments that justified the choice of Iraq were not only erroneous – as everyone acknowledges now – but much worse than this, they were all disseminated by the Iranian secret services or Iranian agents and allies, as a careful investigation reveals. (Casaca, The hidden invasion of Iraq)

On the second question, the answer is even a clearer No. The argument that military coups failed before remains unconvincing, as we can quote examples such as Portugal where you had countless failed military coups before the successful one.

The US military intervention did not only depose a dictator, it destroyed the Iraqi state, implanted chaos and allowed the well-organised forces of Teheran to take hold of the country.

In the invasion of Iraq there was not only a question of lack of proportionality; the distinctive factor of the Iraqi operation was that it can be simultaneously described as a warmongering and an appeasing act, as much as this classification might at first seem extraordinary.

The history of flirtation between the West and religious fanaticism has been long and consistent. If some episodes are well known, such as Israel support to Hamas as a mean to weaken the Palestinian authority, the Western support to Bin Laden and other jihadists to confront the Soviet Union in Afghanistan or the long-standing support to the

Wahabi-Saudi alliance against moderate pretenders, some others, such as support to the Iranian theocracy are less known and understood.

The Iranian theocracy has such a radical and literally screaming anti-Western attitude that it is normally difficult for the Western leaders to openly engage and praise it, but most of the Western leadership has done its most to justify an appeasement policy towards Iran.

Although the Iranian theocracy never promoted democracy, the country was widely described as the starter of “Muslim democracy”, whatever this might mean. Although the regime leaders were always clear and united on its most important issues (1) theocratic nature of government; (2) expansionism by every means, including terrorism and nuclear weapons and (3) disrespect of basic human rights; the West kept finding moderates among its leaders, exactly the same way it considered Hitler to be a moderate Nazi.

Although evidence abounds on the involvement of Teheran in sponsoring destabilisation and terrorism across the whole region, politicians and opinion leaders keep on saying that Iran is a stabilising force either in Afghanistan or in Iraq or elsewhere.

The problem of the Iraqi operation was not only and not mainly the disproportionate use of force; it was the appeasement attitude that allowed agents and allies of the theocracy to poison the Western intelligence with false claims on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction; claims which allowed a hidden invasion of Iraq by Iranian trained terrorist forces, that allowed it to destroy the state and to turn impossible the conviviality between different religious or ethnic communities.

In short, the West decided to start a democratic movement in the Greater Middle East not by confronting the most organic and threatening of the opponents of democracy – the religious fanaticism that showed to the World how far it could go in September eleven – but by calling the supposed moderate fanatics in Iran to bring democracy to Iraq.

A disproportionate and unnecessarily brutal and state demolishing warmongering attitude in Iraq was in fact based in an appeasement strategy towards Iran.

Nothing exemplifies this policy better than the attitude of the former US State Department desk officer for Iran and Iraq in the Clinton Administration, Kenneth Pollack.

In 2002 he authored a book titled “The case for invading Iraq” that is the most comprehensive published document supporting the armed intervention in Iraq.

In 2004 he authored a book titled “The Iranian Puzzle” that is the most comprehensive published document supporting the appeasement policy towards Iran.

In 2008 he authored a book titled “A path out of the desert” where in view of the Iraqi fiasco – needless to say, not because the policy he advised was disastrous, but because his instructions were not correctly implemented – he defends delivering the region to the influence of Teheran.

The appeasement attitude towards Teheran, like in the past other appeasements, has several types of supporters and motivations, but resists always to face reality.

3. To confront appeasement

The three most important appeasement battle fields are the persecution of the Iranian opposition; the nuclear threat and the Iranian expansionism in the region, namely in Iraq.

The Iranian regime has managed a ferocious repression campaign against its internal opposition, namely against its only sizable and capable nation-wide opposition group, the PMOI.

The West has not only silenced most of the crimes committed against its opponents, but it reversed the roles, presenting the opposition as a terrorist force and the Iranian regime as a victim needing Western protection.

This abject farce – fully in-line with the worse Western appeasement history – has barely ended in Europe, but continues in the United States.

The Iranian extensive nuclear programme – that the Western leaders were forced to acknowledge only month after the Iranian opposition presented unequivocal evidence of its development – was never confronted with a firm Western opposition, and continues its way.

However, the most dramatic consequences of the appeasement policy have been felt in the expansionist agenda of Teheran.

For Iran, to get hold of Iraq was and still is a more urgent and valuable step than to acquire nuclear weapons, but this was never understood in the West.

When we recently assisted to the US Ambassador in Baghdad protesting the public acknowledgement that conversations are being held in Teheran on the formation of a negative alliance that can reverse the results of the Iraqi election vote, one wonders why the West offered Iran the control of Iraq in the first place.

The appeasement policy of the West did not stop the Iranian expansionist agenda but actually encouraged it. The holding of Iraq has always been viewed as the most strategic priority by the Iranian clergy, but it will not stop there.

As the regime is ever more isolated from its own population and unable to answer its demands, expansion becomes the only way to survive, and this expansion is done against the democratic aspirations of the people in the region and by using a mix of terrorism and diplomatic pressure to attain its objectives.

A strategy of firmness towards Teheran does not need and does not call for plans of an armed intervention on this country.

The first thing to be done is to support the Iranian people's democratic aspirations, acknowledging the right of the Iranian people to be governed in a democratic way, and to work with every Iranian truthfully committed with a democratic, secular, religious and ethnic tolerant Iran.

The second is to support a strong policy of diplomatic and economic isolation of the theocratic regime, a policy that has been followed lately by the US.

The third is to contain Teheran expansionism, identifying and combating the Iranian terrorist networks, confronting their presence in Iraq by all possible means and preventing the growth of its influence everywhere else in the region.

Of course, it seems doubtful that one can pursue this change of strategy with the very same people responsible for developing an appeasement attitude.

A thorough analysis of what went wrong and why – including a thorough independent inquiry on what happened in Iraq – cannot be seen as a matter of political vendettas, but as a pre-condition for a new policy.

We can only hope there will be political will to pursue this new course of action. The sooner the better!

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(Paulo Casaca)