

DEAR FRANÇOIS, YOU'RE WRONG ON SYRIA

Amir Taheri - Asharq Al-Awsat - daily newspaper London
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On Sunday, France's former Prime Minister Francois Fillon may win the primary organized by the French Republican Party and centrist allies to become their nominee in next year's presidential election. As far as I am concerned this should be good news. The program that Fillon has published reflects much of what I believe France needs to overcome its psycho-politico-economic crisis. I have also admired Fillon as a man of rectitude at a time that politics, even in well-established democracies, suffers from a lowering of ethical standards. Fillon, has enough experience to seek the highest office in his country. For years he presided over the National Assembly's Defense Committee before joining various Cabinets in several ministerial posts, and , finally, becoming prime minister for five years. I first met Fillon by chance when I visited his hometown of Le Mans in 1987 as part of a tour of France to promote my book on Ayatollah Khomeini.

One event I had in Le Mans was an interview by the local radio in its main news bulletin to which Fillon, the local member in the French parliament, had also been invited for an interview on domestic policies. After the program the radio anchorman invited us to lunch before Fillon and I took the train back to Paris. The short journey provided an opportunity to get acquainted with Fillon's political temperament and thinking. What I liked was Fillon's belief that conservative parties in Western democracies have best succeeded when they gave their message a social dimension. After concepts such as regulated working hours, the formation of trade unions, and unemployment benefits started under Britain's 19th century Conservative Prime Minister Disraeli. In France, General de Gaulle's first government in the aftermath of the Second World became the architect of an emerging welfare state. So, were I to vote in the French primary next Sunday, I should pick Fillon against Alain Juppe, also a former Prime Minister who, as far as I am concerned, has the disadvantage of having started as a protégé of the unlamented Jacques Chirac.

And, yet, I find it difficult to put the approving cross for Fillon. The reason, in one word, is: Syria. For me Syria has become the litmus test not only of foreign policy but also of our humanity. Fillon's position, perhaps linked to his belief that Europe must make a deal with Russia under Vladimir Putin, is that we ought to accept Bashar al-Assad, warts and all, as the lesser evil in Syria. Fillon has cited several reasons for his assertion. The first set of reasons could be labelled "Realpolitik" ones. Whether we like Assad or not is beside the point; after all the Western democracies accepted Stalin as ally against the greater evil

of Adolf Hitler. So if the democracies wish to defeat and destroy ISIS (Da'esh in Arabic) they need Assad forces as ally.

The second set of reasons could be labeled as parochial, including the claim that Assad is the protector of minorities, most notably the Christians of the Orient to whose defense France is historically committed, according to Fillon. I think both set of reasons that Fillon cites for his approach to Syria are flawed. The "Realpolitik" ones are the easiest to dispose of.

Assad is no Stalin.

In 1941 when he was accepted as an ally of Britain, the Soviet despot had an almost limitless reservoir of cannon-fodder at his disposal. Because he was fighting a foreign invader in a "Great Patriotic War", Stalin could unite his diverse subjects in a way that the Communist regime didn't dream of before the war. Moreover, as the largest country in the world, the USSR offered an ocean of space that could suck Nazi forces in and through to annihilation. Assad has none of those things. In fact, on numerous occasions he has complained about a chronic shortage of manpower to embark on a sustained military campaign. He has increasingly depended on cannon-fodder from Lebanon, provided by Hezbollah, and Afghan, Pakistan and Iraqi "volunteers for martyrdom" recruited and paid by Tehran, not to mention thousands of Iranians sent to protect him. In his "notes from Syria", published posthumously, the Iranian General Hussein Hamadani, killed in Aleppo, relates how his men saved Assad at the 11th hour "after everyone else, including Russian military advisers, had fled."

In 1941 the overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens were prepared to fight on Stalin's side against the foreign invader. In Syria, today, Assad is fighting against a majority of Syrian people. That almost half of Syria's population has become either refugees or displaced persons shows that a majority do not wish to fight for Assad. Stalin was sure to have enough people to capture, cleanse and control whatever territory he won from the Germans. Assad lacks the numbers to do the same even if one handed him Syria on a platter. In any case, Assad and his Iranian and Russian backers are not fighting against ISIS but focus on destroying non-ISIS opponents of the regime. Putin and Assad are massacring the unarmed population of Aleppo, not the armed henchmen of the self-styled Caliph.

Regardless of how this tragic conflict ends, no minority can ever again hope to rule Syria, let alone rebuild the shattered country, even with the support of foreign powers. Also unlike Stalin, Assad controls little territory; estimates vary between five and 20 per cent, not enough to give his faction a significant hinterland in military terms.

Fillon's other reason for holding one's nose and accepting Assad is equally dubious. Assad has killed more Christians of the Orient than any other ruler in the history of independent Syria.

This is how Syrian poet Hala Muhammad puts it:

Syria has been demolished by war, And memories, Mother dearest Do not a country make..."

The Ba'athist regime was also responsible for depriving another minority, the Kurds who account for 10 per cent of the population, of their nationality making them stateless. Opposition to the regime has always consisted of a rainbow coalition of most of Syria's minorities, including Turcomans, and even the Alawite community from which the Assad clan originally emerged. (The Druze and Ismailis have not joined the fray but are far from being Assad's fans.) Assad's al-Kalbiyah clan is a minority among Alawites divided into larger groups such as Kalaziah, Heydariah and Murshadiyah.

In "Realpolitik", making a bargain with the Devil may make sense provided the devil in question is capable of delivering. In Syria, today, Assad cannot deliver anything except more death and desolation.

Dear François, you are wrong on Syria. To save Syria from deeper tragedies and to save humanity from greater shame, Assad must go!

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