

The truce in Syria

A suffered and complex agreement for a ceasefire in Syria has been reached at the end of 2016 between the government forces and the opposition, effectively ratifying the terms of the previous agreement defined by Turkey and Russia, through which were established their respective areas of control and interest within the country.

The news of the signing of the agreement was first given by Russia, during a press conference held in Moscow on December 29 at the presence of President Vladimir Putin and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu.

The ceasefire began at midnight the next day and will affect all actors on the ground in Syria, with the exception of groups recognized as terrorist organizations by the United Nations, including the Daesh and Jabhat al Nusra Front, recently renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in an attempt to turn it into an acceptable extent by the international community.

The agreement was signed by the Damascus government with representatives of seven opposition organizations, and provides for a monitoring of the ceasefire and the start of a procedure for establishing a negotiating framework within which to define the future structure of Syrian political transition.

The peace talks will instead begin in Geneva next February 8, in an exclusively intra-Syria formula, while Russia has become the promoter of an international summit on Syria to be held in Astana, Kazakhstan, where engaging Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq and Jordan. An explicit invitation was also launched to the United States, opening the possibility of a more effective cooperation between Moscow and Washington after the settlement of Donald Trump.

The agreement somehow manages to establish a truce between the parties fighting on the ground, but opens new disturbing questions in relation to the role - and then essentially the recognition - of some of the components of the conflict, such as the jihadist groups of the Al Qaeda sphere.

The intention of Russia and Turkey is to promote a ceasefire in order to relieve the agony of the civilian population especially in Aleppo, battered by the fighting and become during 2016 the last stronghold of the opposition to the regime of Bashar al -Asad. However, an opposition so heterogeneous as to constitute a source of deep embarrassment to the same Western countries that support it, given the overtly presence within it of groups linked to Al Qaeda, ISIS sympathizers or simply an expression of that Islamic radicalism that in Syria and Iraq found relief under the two most bloody and long-lasting regional conflicts.

To embarrass not just the West is mainly the presence of Jabhat al-Nusra Front, an al Qaeda training exquisitely extraction, according to some media supported by Saudi Arabia and other regional actors, transited over the last year through an action of maquillage politician who has tried to changing its name to make it expendable in terms of international negotiations. A misguided attempt, which further fuelled the controversy in the international community, promoting a partial legitimacy, at the same time, the narrative of the other party on the ground - Iran, Russia and Turkey - in justifying their increased commitment to support the loyalist government forces of Bashar al-Asad regime.

The whole spectrum of the Syrian crisis presents ambiguities and inconsistencies difficult to compose the result of over five years of international conduct of the crisis widely factional and politically inadequate. The accusations against Iran of having interfered into the local crisis, favouring the entrance of their own forces and those of the Lebanese Hezbollah, and later of Russia, echoed those of al-Asad allies denouncing interference in the primordial dynamic crisis by

Qatar and Saudi Arabia, with the support of those who over the past five years have become the main jihadist formations on the planet.

Fit into this complex picture Turkey, the United States and Europe. The first is animated by anti-Kurdish positions in the desire to promote an evolution of the conflict favourable to their interests, however, passing first through support for anti-Assad militias to the Free Syrian Army and then the pro-regime through a new partnership defined with Russia and - albeit less obvious - with Iran.

The United States are literally exploring the horizon looking between the desire to support the secular formations and legitimate protest to anti-Asad - who, however, never knew and could play any real role in the conflict, coming soon marginalized - and that Galaxy militias on the ground that have often led to profound embarrassment for the US administration as a result of their military incapacity or, worse, their affiliation with Al Qaeda jihadist formations or the Islamic State.

The sporadic air operations conducted on Syria therefore hadn't a significant political impact, even causing a deep confusion about the role of Washington and its European allies, which have always seemed trapped more in the political debate than in the real search for an effective solution on the field.

Most of the groups being fought on the ground in Syria is therefore recognized and legitimized by some of the international players operating in the country in support of the regime or the opposition, and considered part of the great galaxy of other terrorist system. With the result of causing confusion and ambiguity through which the international community has tried to define their own interests and priorities last December at the United Nations, through the specious grounds it would offer a chance to escape the battered civilian population Aleppo and other areas affected by the fighting.

That of December in New York has therefore had more the flavour of a political negotiation than the weight of a humanitarian resolution, now opening the door to a future stage of negotiations to finalize the actual partition capacity of the different interests in the territory Syrian.

The perception of analysts is therefore today that an agreement will tend to a certain extent on the one hand to legitimize the role and position of some organizations openly regarded as terrorist, while the other is going to consolidate the macro-interest lines regional, which in all probability will sacrifice first Kurdish interests and the value of their sacrifice in these five years of painful civil war. It remains difficult to interpret when the American variable, which some say could enable a rapprochement with Russia going thus to define a broader framework of crisis with Moscow, perhaps even encouraging the lifting of the embargo and the resumption of a cautious dialectical policy between the two superpowers.

The failure of US policy in Syria has, however, given preferential conditions to other regional players such as Iran, which could find themselves now in the best position to impose some diktat hardly negotiable by the new American administration, and that could open new and wider front of the issue of bilateral relations between Washington and Tehran, re-entered a delicate phase with the launch of Trump presidency.

Scenarios for the near future

The ceasefire in Syria is a major achievement primary for Russia, which in fact announces the cessation of hostilities from the position of a military superiority on the ground, mends his relationship with Erdogan in Turkey and aims to Western community as the "necessary power" which can determine the painful but necessary political and military choices to restore order in the Middle East.

However, this is a somewhat unstable order, more cosmetic than substantive, and it is necessary at this stage only to define the overall framework of the balances on the ground, delaying to a following phase the effective implementation and solidification.

The variables of this phase of apparent stability are numerous, as well as the potential difficulties that could bring the weapons, in a moment, to take over the balance on the ground.

Russia seems willing to use paper of the Syrian conflict as an element of openness to the new American administration, on the other hand, responded ambiguously but nevertheless optimistic about the option to define with Moscow a comprehensive framework of balance.

Turkey and Erdogan, through the most recent change of deployment, has determined that the collapse of the Syrian opposition forces, favouring the re-conquest of Aleppo and placing itself within a deployment that does not do easily and does not facilitate a dialogue with European counterparts and more generally Westerners. The goal of Turkey today seems to be primarily to prevent any form of consolidation of Kurdish interests in Syria and in the region, at the same time violently repressing even the autonomist ambitions and participatory on the local and national level, however, giving impetus again that violence that more and more often leads to terrorist attacks if not actual fighting in the areas populated by the Kurdish majority.

Iran has definitively consolidated its interest in restoring the authority role of central Damascus, thereby restoring one of the main regional proxies also acts to ensure the safety of Tehran and ensuring a relevant role in the debate on the definition of the future structure regional. It is Iran today, paradoxically, to express their opposition to US participation in the talks for the definition of the future structure of Syria, exerting a role unthinkable just three years ago.

Tehran finally share with Turkey the interest in limiting any ambition of the Kurdish entity, thus ensuring the possibility of limiting any separatist or autonomist instance of their Kurdish regional components. A position that also leaves little hope to the capacity of the Iraqi Kurdish groups could find effective support to the consolidation of their autonomy, in fact tolerated at this stage solely as an element of the coalition force against the Islamic State.

The Obama administration instead ended with the apparent failure of an effective Middle East policy that, while it can boast the success achieved in the negotiations with Iran, on the other hand, however, must come to terms with the impossibility of defining and implement an effective and credible policy in Syria, Iraq, Libya and much of the region.

It thus remains to be seen how and if the administration Trump will actually find a negotiated formula with Russia on the one hand able to secure American interests without amplifying the image damage suffered more than five years of ambiguity, and at the same time build with Russia relationship ideally capable of encouraging greater dialogue at the global level, particularly by defining a negotiating line on the issue of Ukraine.

The future of the regime of Bashar al-Asad

The big question about future Syrian balance remains, however, on the role of the regime and especially of Bashar al-Asad.

The negotiation that begins with the December UN agreements now opens up the field to options unthinkable until a few months ago. First there is the need to define a relational framework with still numerous organizations and fierce resistance against the regime, including the jihadist, identifying a possible role at the negotiating table and then assuming their future within what will be the next institutional structure of the country.

All this necessarily requires an end of the regime of Bashar al-Asad and, likelihood, of the entire Alawite system, with the entry of groups and factions so far away from each other which may lead to a new and perhaps even more violent instability in the country. The interest of Russia is not to defend Bashar al-Asad, but to identify a balanced policy formula that guarantees the continuity of the political and military interests of Moscow in the country. At the same time, Turkey is looking for a solution which could primary contain Kurds, and therefore having no real interest nor for the continuity of al-Asad nor for the creation of a pluralistic system.

Iran has on the contrary a long list of priorities that form a sort of red line that cannot and must not be crossed. Among these priorities, the most important consist in the territorial integrity of Syria and the settlement of a political system that is not hostile to Iran, and that it is potentially interested in continuing the military and strategic cooperation with Tehran. At the same time Iran does not want to give political space to any group that is an expression of Saudi interests, fearing the start of a process of radicalization in politics and the return to violence in the form of terrorist attacks and sectarian political violence.

The Kurds are hoping instead still in support of the United States and Europe - probably in vain - to start the self-determination process that ideally could lead to the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish and, on a makeshift, a strong autonomy regional. The divisions within the Kurdish system, but above all the changed international scenario, are likely to frustrate heavily these expectations, with the relative risk of a radicalization also within the territories predominantly Kurdish, Syria, Iran and Turkey.

Also the position of Bashar al-Asad and the military forces, who consider themselves, entitled to the conduct of negotiations by virtue of the role to protect the institutions and the continuity of the regime finally must necessarily be taken into account. Bashar al-Asad is aware of representing an already uncomfortable role for most of the international actors - perhaps even for Iran itself - but would want to ensure the continuity of his entourage and which political forces is both the top and expression, through active participation in the planning of any negotiation hypotheses internationally.

Demand that is likely to become completely incompatible with the positions of the negotiating parties and especially with much of the Western community, that the release of al-Asad scene made a cornerstone of negotiations.