

Syria: An Epistemological Obstacle

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Knowledge of reality is a light that always casts a shadow in some nook or cranny. It is never immediate, never complete. Revelations of reality are always recurrent. Reality is never 'what we might believe it to be': it is always what we ought to have thought. Empirical thought is clear in retrospect, when the apparatus of reason has been developed. Whenever we look back and see the errors of our past, we discover truth through a real intellectual repentance. Indeed, we know against previous knowledge, when we destroy knowledge that was badly made and surmount all those obstacles to spiritualisation that lie in the mind itself.

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2002), 24.

In using the term “civil-global” to describe the war that has raged in Syria since summer 2011, the most clear-sighted political commentators are attempting to deconstruct—in order to understand its rationality—the various dimensions of one of the most atypical post-Cold War conflicts of the twenty-first century. Not only does this war of a new kind compress different layers of conflict, and not only is it changing the conventional nature of war and terrorist threats, but it is also producing discourse, representations, ideas and positions that defy the most classical methods of humanities research, even research period, and traditional diplomatic practices and customs.

More than any other recent conflict, this civil-global war has produced multiple strands of discourse—symptomatic manifestations of a so-called “post-truth,” “post-factual,” or “fake news” era—resulting from interactions between politics, non-governmental organizations, and the contemporary media.

As for the so-called “social networks,” products of the new technological tools of the internet, they do not produce new social practices but rather generate greater social atomization of individuals disconnected from reality. They have imposed themselves as the primary “post-truth” actors, contributing fully to the “disruptive” impact of a digital revolution that has spread across the globe in an authoritarian manner. Not a master conspiracy, but a process without a subject, as Louis Althusser might have described it, that follows the logic of pursuing dematerialized, virtual, and globalized profit.

With this in mind, philosopher Bernard Stiegler defines disruption as “a phenomenon of accelerated innovation that forms the basis of the strategy developed in Silicon Valley: it involves moving faster than society in order to impose upon it models that destroy social structures and render the public authorities powerless. It is a strategy of incapacitating the adversary.”¹

Disruption thus imposes new normative constraints on the majority of social practices, including those relating to the most private spheres of the connected individual. Greater understanding of the irruption of this disruptive reality into the heart of the Syrian war requires—first of all—establishing a phenomenology of the dominant representations of this civil-global conflict so as to—secondly—examine how and why this connects with, condenses into, and manufactures an “epistemological obstacle” that prevents the causes of its development, expansion, and globalization from being retraced.

Consideration will—thirdly—be given to how this obstacle can be overcome in order to draw lessons, if not concepts, enabling readoption of a rational and improvable reality capable of transformation in order to lay the foundations for new stabilities, or even sustainable mechanisms of peace in the various regions of the Middle East.

A BRIEF PHENOMENOLOGY OF WAR DISCOURSE

The final phase of the Battle of Aleppo was accompanied by a surge of “fake news.”² During fall 2016, radio, television, and newspapers from the major national and international press rallied to try and “save” Aleppo from the horror: recapture by the Syrian government army. Our ears, eyes, and collective intelligence were bombarded by a daily deluge of propaganda. The primary device of this collective Orwellization consisted of inverting the operational military situation: Aleppo was not occupied by Salafist jihadi groups (the same as those behind the attacks in Paris and elsewhere), but was “under siege” by the national forces of the “Bashar al-Assad regime”! A second distortion of reality: the “moderate,” or even “secular” and “democratic” rebels—i.e. Al-Qaeda’s butchers in Syria—were valiantly resisting Genghis Khan and his Syrian, Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah

1 Bernard Stiegler, *Dans la Disruption: Comment ne pas Devenir Fou?* (Paris: Editions Les Liens qui Libèrent, 2016).

2 The Battle of Aleppo took place from 2012 to 2016 in Syria’s former economic capital and second city. It began on July 19, 2012 with a rebel offensive that quickly took control of eastern areas but failed to take the whole city. For four years, Aleppo found itself divided between its western zone, held by the government army, and the eastern zone, controlled by the jihadi rebels. Toward the end of 2015, military intervention from Russia eventually tipped the balance in favor of the loyalist camp. Eastern Aleppo was finally surrounded in September 2016 and in November 2016 the jihadi defenses collapsed. Driven into a final pocket of resistance, the rebels surrendered on December 13, 2016. Under the terms of an agreement, the remaining insurgents and besieged civilians were evacuated to Idlib Governorate between December 15 and 22, 2016.

Tatars. Finally, tens of thousands of women and children were dying on a daily basis under the deadly carpet bombing of the Russian and Syrian air forces.

Amid this chorus of fake news, if not propaganda, *Le Monde* led the way. From the wealthy neighborhoods of Beirut, its correspondent wrote: “Deluge of Russian and Syrian fire to break Aleppo—This bloody bombing aims to destroy the rebellion and dishearten the population.” Bravo: “Bomb, surround, starve. For months, for years, with no let up. Until the exhausted enemy decides to lay down its arms and evacuate the area it is defending.”

The first piece of “information” provided by *Le Monde*: the same terrorist groups that had slaughtered Christians, Alawites, Kurds, Druze, loyalist Sunnis and others in Syria for over four years were “defending” Aleppo. What remarkable news! It is worth noting in passing that the fighter jets and drones of the American-led Coalition are responsible for “strikes,” which are usually “surgical” and “targeted,” as was the case—at that very moment—at the Deir ez-Zor airport, where over 90 Syrian soldiers were killed just a few hours after signature of the ceasefire in Aleppo. Russian and Syrian planes, on the other hand, bomb with indifferent and unlimited sadistic cruelty, just as Allied air forces bombed the towns and villages of Normandy in 1944, and then Dresden and other Germany cities of no strategic value.

A second statement from *Le Monde*: “the Syrian regime is waging (...) a slow and cruel war of suffocation that perfectly suits the loyalist army, a patchwork of militia and regular units with limited offensive capacities.” Is the *Le Monde* correspondent aware of any wars that are quick, non-cruel, or even kind and beneficent? Does he truly understand the nature of a civil war, a civil-regional, civil-international war? As for “limited offensive capacities,” if he had more experience on the ground he would have observed the technical transformation of the three corps of the Syrian National Army, which are now equipped with state of the art Russian and Chinese kit. In fact, just a few paragraphs later he refers to “sophisticated weapons ...”³ Make up your mind!

So the Syrian Army has allies that have decided to support it—how dreadful!—in recapturing the entirety of its national territory in order to prevent the territorial and political breakdown seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. As for Chechen, Chinese, North African, European, and in particular French mercenaries? Not a word. Radio silence also on the delivery of arms and mercenaries funded by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf plutocracies with the support of a number of Western intelligence agencies, including the French external security agency!

A third assessment from *Le Monde*, highly symptomatic of the cultural quality of the body of “modern journalism”: “a technique reeking of the Middle Ages ...” Is this down to ignorance or haste? Here, our permanent special correspondent

3 Benjamin Barthe, “En Syrie, déluge de feu du régime et de la Russie pour briser Alep,” *Le Monde*, September 28, 2016, accessed March 3, 2018, http://www.lemonde.fr/syrie/article/2016/09/28/deluge-de-feu-russo-syrien-pour-briser-alep_5004702_1618247.html.

in Beirut employs a suggestive reference to the “Middle Ages” to convince us that the war of liberation led by the Syrian Army and its allies is dragging us back to one of the darkest periods of humanity! A period of a thousand years extending from the fifth to fifteenth centuries, the Middle Ages may have an undeserved reputation, but a decent man with a little cultural education should know that a number of technological and intellectual revolutions, with a pivotal role in world history, took place during this transitional period. The medievalists Jacques Le Goff and Johan Huizinga have written a number of definitive books on this subject that the staff of *Le Monde* would do well to look up.

Finally, the most factually contestable piece of fiction: “Eastern Aleppo, the stronghold of the insurgents (...) with 250,000 inhabitants.”⁴ The most serious Western military experts estimated the number of “insurgents” in the eastern areas of the city to be around ... 20,000. The same sources confirmed that civilians on the ground numbered no more than 70,000 and fell into two categories: those who had joined the jihadis and those who had been held there against their will in order to serve as human shields for the valiant “insurgents.” When forty-nine of them decided to escape via the humanitarian corridors opened by the Syrian and Russian armies, they were executed in cold blood by these same “resistance fighters.” In regard to many of these “civilians,” noted a senior officer from the European intelligence agency, “it would be more accurate to call them hostages ...”

So why expend so much energy selling us this false “Stalingrad in reverse,” to use the words of a French ambassador posted to the region? This latter began to doubt—better late than never—the value of François Hollande’s foreign policy strategy, which “no-one in the region gives a damn about,” he added skeptically. Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault could be seen on the small screen at the time responding to the presenters on a publicly-owned audiovisual channel: “this killing must stop, the images shown on the television are unbearable!” Since when does a minister of the Republic base his remarks on “images shown on the television”?

Three key reasons may explain this panicked propaganda, which by no means reflected the true situation on the ground. A resurrected Battle of Stalingrad, the liberation of Aleppo—in which the Syrian Army was seeking to recapture its own national territory—signified a double defeat for its adversaries: a defeat for the misnamed “Arab revolutions” through which Washington hoped to bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power in several Arab capitals; and a defeat for the NATO, Israel and Gulf axis hoping to see events in Syria mirror those in Iraq and Libya, including the fragmentation of nation states in the region into multiple ethnically and religiously purified micro states. A true manifestation of the “Greater Middle East” project led by Condoleezza Rice, George W. Bush’s former secretary of state: a project not renounced by the Obama administration, which then found itself overcome by new realities on the ground.

4 Benjamin Barthe, “En Syrie, déluge de feu ...”

The final reckoning has turned out to be particularly disastrous for Western countries, foremost among them the United States. Neo-Sultan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is gradually moving away from NATO and eyeing up the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; Russia and Iran are back in the eastern Great Game and the Mediterranean is no longer a Western sea.⁵ As in Djibouti, the Chinese navy is building a long-term base in Tartus, and Vladimir Putin continues to impose his agenda on the global community in order to promote a “regional Yalta” while marginalizing the West. Last but not least, Iran cherishes the hope of regaining its position as the major regional power in the Middle East.

On December 13, 2016 at the United Nations Security Council, addressing representatives from Syria and Russia, United States ambassador Samantha Power dared to declare quite seriously: “Syria, Russia, and Iran: three member states of the UN contributing to a noose around civilians. It should shame you. Instead, by all appearances it is emboldening you. You are plotting your next assault. Are you truly incapable of shame? Is there literally nothing that can shame you? Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin? That just creeps you out a little bit? Is there nothing you will not lie about, or justify?”

Is Ms Power ashamed of the million Iraqis killed in spring 2003? Is Ms Power ashamed of the daily, clandestine collateral damage caused by American drones across some fifteen locations around the globe? Is Ms Power ashamed of the destruction of part of the Arctic by big American companies? Is Ms Power ashamed of the tens if not hundreds of thousands of victims of Operation Condor (most of whose bodies have never been found)?

The list goes on of the millions of disappeared, the appalling processions and deportations organized by successive American administrations—both Republican and Democrat—since the end of the Second World War, since the discovery of the Nazi concentration camps and the Nuremberg trials! This rhetoric of shame anchors the phenomenology of post-truth in morality, a morality applied to the rights of individuals against those of national collectives. “The fiction of the policy of human rights, which is predicated on the national infrastructure that it also strives to destroy! We know that the individual’s accession to rights threatens our very existence, and our national freedom,” notes Hervé Juvin.⁶

In the spirit of Jean-Marie Colombani’s “We are all Americans!” the “Discussion” pages of *Le Monde* on December 15, 2016 began with a letter signed by two individuals with the heading “SOS Aleppo.” The first author, son of André Glucksmann (former Maoist turned “New Philosopher,” before ending his career in the ranks of the American neoconservative school), is an advisor to various NATO-linked interest groups in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere, which seek to revive primitive anti-Sovietism transformed into hatred of Russia. The other

⁵ *prochetmoyen-orient.ch*, September 12, 2016.

⁶ Hervé Juvin, *Le Gouvernement du Désir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2016).

author of this SOS, Yannick Jadot, was a short-lived Green candidate for the French presidential election! Despite never having set foot in Syria and appearing to be entirely unaware of the complexities of the region, this “candidate” also enlists the Syrian tragedy in his morality with the aim to influence. The fact that a survivor of the weak and divided French Greens could find himself thus embarked on a communication campaign spreading recurring NATO messages forms part of this phenomenology of war discourse.

Without deconstructing all of the devices used by the two authors, we can see at work the broad strands of transatlantic propaganda: “the eradication of the population of an *entire* city” (the eastern areas of Aleppo represent less than a third of the city’s population); “Aleppo is exploding like Srebrenica and Grozny”; “the master of the Kremlin accepts,” etc. The opinion page reminds us that “Aleppo had achieved its revolution ...” What revolution? The imposition of Sharia law, Islamic courts, and stoning women? Allow me to refer to the very comprehensive and instructive *Le Monde Diplomatique* article of December 2016: “Who are the Syrian rebels?”

This edifying electoral SOS primarily asks the French electorate to judge and of course to vote, calling for strengthened sanctions against Russia. And there we have it! Without a word about the West’s global “humanitarian” wars—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Palestine, etc.—nor the least criticism of the blindness of the American and French diplomatic services in particular, the new world enemy is clearly identified: Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

The fabrication of an eternally Soviet Russia constitutes one of the central devices in the phenomenology of war discourse. In this regard, allow me again to refer to the conclusions of an academic study, Guy Mettan’s superb book *Russie-Occident, une Guerre de Mille Ans: La Russophobie de Charlemagne à la Crise Ukrainienne. Pourquoi Nous Aimons Tant Détester la Russie [Russia vs. the West, a Thousand Year War: Russophobia from Charlemagne to the Ukrainian Crisis. Why We Love to Hate Russia So Much]*, published by Éditions des Syrtes in May 2015. The book is in its fifth edition.

By way of a subliminal message, our two authors call for “independent information.” Clearly, between the NATO communication strategy and a French Green Party seeking to retain its last few members, freedom and independent information relating to the Syrian war would appear guaranteed! In concluding, this strange opinion piece reflects another broader campaign that seeks to convince us that Putin’s Russia got Donald Trump elected, with our two authors suggesting that the same demons are doubtless responsible for Brexit, Alain Juppé’s failure in the first right-wing primary, and the presence of the Front National in the second round of the forthcoming French presidential election.

The CIA, FBI, and Barack Obama himself have confirmed that “Russian” cyber spies did indeed influence the result of the American presidential election. That remains to be seen. One thing has however been confirmed: the existence of

platforms entitled “The Whole Truth,” recounting a host of completely unverifiable information, linked to hackers based in Romania and Ukraine, and pocketing maximum advertising revenue before disappearing from digital air. But what is NATO doing? The teachings of George Orwell have been surpassed like the sound barrier and herald, in the near future, the criminalization of European—including French—journalists who continue to collaborate with media outlets such as *Radio Sputnik* and *Russia Today*. The process is gradual: we shall soon encounter the joys of a new McCarthyism, which has already begun to extend its moralizing and normative tentacles.

Under the heading “Aleppo propaganda,” researchers from Lebanese television channel Al Mayadeen (an internationally recognized media outlet) scanned the images from blogs and digital networks claiming to document the martyrs of Aleppo. Among them they discovered images of the streets of Islamabad following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto (December 27, 2007), summer scenes in Deir ez-Zor filmed in the areas held by Islamic State (ISIS), and old footage of Cairo’s Tahrir Square in full Egyptian revolt in spring 2011.

The poor victims of Eastern Aleppo certainly did not ask to be drafted into this phenomenology of war discourse. One still now recalls with fear the martyrdom—the term here is entirely appropriate—of the village of Maaloula, which fell into the hands of Islamists from the Free Syrian Army (FSL) and the Al-Nusra Front on September 7, 2013, along with other settlements in this mountainous region to the north-east of Damascus. Reports and witness statements received by the Maronite Catholic Patriarchate of Bkerké (Lebanon) described women being raped for hours on end before having their breasts, hands, and feet cut off.

Patriarch Bechara al-Rahi hastened to send these terrifying documents to the office of Laurent Fabius, who did nothing with them, judging that Syria’s Christians—as a majority—supported the bloody dictator Bashar al-Assad, and that some of these “moderate” rapists had been armed by France itself. At the time, the Parisian press had no interest in such information concerning Christians suspected of supporting the “Damascus regime.” Nicolas Truong, editor of the “Discussion” pages of *Le Monde*, preferred to stick to the mainstream statements of historian Jean-Pierre Filiu and media “experts” who more or less all shared the same black and white discourse.

Finally, the most recent outage in the country of the Enlightenment: last December 14, mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo decided to turn off the lights of the Eiffel Tower in solidarity with Aleppo. Such courage!

The academic symposium on Syria, which was due to take place on Saturday November 26, 2016 at the Caen Memorial museum, was cancelled two days in advance with no form of hearing. “We cannot hand over the keys of the Memorial museum to a symposium suspected of defending Bashar al-Assad, who has been waging a vile war since 2011,” declared Stéphane Grimaldi, director of the Caen Memorial museum, to Agence France-Presse (AFP). And our brave redresser of

wrongs—communications director for the Bordeaux town hall from 1995 to 2000 and for the French Association of Mayors from 2000 to 2002—specified that his decision was taken following a “social media” campaign, describing the participants of the academic symposium at the Caen Memorial museum (university academics, journalists, Parti Socialiste (PS, Socialist Party), Republican and Union des Démocrates et Indépendants (UDI, Union of Democrats and Independents) members of parliament) as nearly if not entirely far-right! Rescheduled for a few days later at the Sorbonne, this symposium was cancelled for a second time under similar circumstances.

A RESPONSE FROM ALAIN CHOUET

Alain Chouet, a well-known Islamic studies expert, specialist on Syria, and former head of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure (DGSE, Directorate-General for External Security) intelligence services, forwarded this statement to a number of editors:

“The Syria Symposium—*The Challenges of Syria and the Region*—that was due to take place this November 26 at the Caen Memorial museum and to which I had been invited to speak has just been cancelled upon the decision of the Memorial museum director who, after agreeing for the symposium to be held a few months ago, has just withdrawn his agreement at the last moment.

The Memorial director claims to have taken the decision to oppose the event after being alerted “by social media” (providing no further details) that this symposium would bring together “well-known far-right activists sympathetic to Bashar al-Assad ...” It would have been intellectually decent on his part, however, to verify such assertions before taking his decision.

I do not know all of the participants of the symposium but those I do know are neither on the far-right nor sympathetic to Bashar al-Assad, notably: Michel Raimbaud, former ambassador and former director of the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons; René Naba, former AFP correspondent in Beirut, and consultant to the International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights (IIPJHR) based in Geneva; Richard Labévière, journalist and writer, and former member of the Socialist Party; Joël Bruneau, UMP-UDI-MoDem (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire-Union des Démocrates et Indépendants-Mouvement Démocrate) mayor of Caen; Gérard Bapt, PS member of the National Assembly; Adonis (the pen name for philosopher and Syrian-Lebanese poet Ali Ahmad Said Esber); Jean Marie Schléret, UMP member of the National Assembly, and former chairman of the National Advisory Council for Disabled Persons; Majed Nehmé, director of the journal *Afrique Asie* (created by Simon Malley, this journal won fame combating Arab and African dictatorships and the anti-apartheid struggle); and finally, myself, removed from my post in summer 2002 due to suspected membership of the PS and “Jospinism.”

None of these individuals are either far-right militants or sympathetic to or supportive of dictatorship. Some, such as the poet Adonis, have on the contrary fought tirelessly against the state violence of which they have themselves been victims. As for myself, over twenty years ago I was the first in France to seek to extend Michel Seurat's research into what he called "the barbarian state." In a lengthy article published in *La Documentation Française*, I provided a detailed description of the methods and mechanisms via which, between 1970 and 1990, Hafez al-Assad appropriated—through duplicity and violence—the entire Syrian state apparatus for the benefit of his family and community. This text still remains—both in France and abroad—one of the leading academic references on the topic.

I challenge anyone to find among my numerous writings, interviews, and talks, the least support for the perpetrators—whoever they are—of the violence committed in Syria and elsewhere, the least support for dictators, and the least reference to the ideas of the far-right, to conspiracy theories, and to antisemitism, which I have on the contrary strongly fought for the last fifty years.

I do not know which "social media" sites alerted the director of the Caen Memorial museum to this meeting of "dangerous fascists." I found one entitled "Fighting Left" with the subtitle "Lefty and proud of it." There are no doubt others, but I have not seen them. There I noted the presence of two individuals who in February 2016 demanded Ms Delphine Ernotte (chair of France Télévisions) to fire Ms Samah Soula, presenter of the program *Un Oeil sur la Planète* [*An Eye on the Planet*], on the grounds that they did not like one of her documentaries on Syria, as they interpreted her description of the atrocities committed by jihadis as implicit support for the Damascus regime."

MICHEL RAIMBAUD AND ANAS ALEXIS CHEBIS

I will give the final word to French ambassador Michel Raimbaud and Anas Alexis Chebis, organizers of this symposium: "Liberty, sweet liberty ... No-one could have thought that the symposium of November 26 organized at the Caen Memorial museum by the *Collectif pour la Syrie* [Syria Collective] would go unnoticed, as the Syrian war and the issues surrounding it are an ultra-sensitive subject that provokes heated debate, but one that has never been presented to the public as is appropriate in a democratic state.

For nearly six years we have heard just one version of the facts, and this monolithism, which is almost unprecedented in the modern history of our country, is deplorable and unacceptable. It says a great deal about the intellectual and moral decay of our "elites." Uniformity of thought is never a good sign, still less if it is associated with a simplifying, disinformative, and untruthful narrative.

We do not seek to produce propaganda, but to offer a different reading, and in any case to present a fairer and more balanced view of the facts and realities. The Caen Symposium was canceled due to pressures that sought only to discredit its

organizers and participants by questioning their “morality” and “academic rigor,” using a well-known method. However, if such failings are to be found somewhere, it is rather with the Syrian “offshore revolutionaries” who haunt the national palaces and monuments, as well as their accomplices on social networks with expertise in the field. Our censors certainly have an almost phenomenal nerve and are not known for their tolerance. They aspire to run Syria, but are already censoring and issuing threats. No-one would want to be governed by such revolutionaries, even if given the title of moderates, apart from their sponsors, who struggle to distinguish effusion from explosion. A single symposium (which in any case did not take place) out of the hundreds that have anesthetized and intoxicated French opinion was enough for the “democrats” and their protectors to fly off the handle and lose their heads.

“We cannot (*it would appear*) hand over the keys of the Memorial museum to a symposium suspected of defending Bashar al-Assad, who has been waging a vile war since 2011”—but the decision (of the Memorial museum) to cancel the symposium equates to giving well-known lobbies the power, choice, and ability to lock or open doors.

French politics, although it claims to be transparent, is not above suspicion and it does not seem wrong to call it into question. The commitment to destroying a sovereign state with whom no war has been declared, to undermine all chance of a political settlement, to flout all rules of international and UN law, is contrary to the tradition of our country. It is its position as a permanent member of the Security Council that provides France with a great part of its status. Are we not sawing off the branch upon which we sit?

Syria has already been partly destroyed and the Syrians feel forgotten, alone with their tragedy, which is even greater because it is hidden in the West and in those Muslim countries that took up the cause of the “revolution” declared by the armed opposition. In Paris, there is a preference for pursuing obsessions that are no longer on the agenda and cherishing nostalgia for contracts that will never be honored. This is neither honorable, nor reasonable.

The truth is clear: we need only look to see, listen to testimony to understand, and pay attention to the growing swell of voices contesting the false view that is inflicted upon us under all circumstances. In the country of reason, no reason remains. Here we can rightly speak of “the French exception,” and it is by no means glorious. In the world of diplomacy we are well and truly out of the game and on the bench, along with our “revolutionary” protégés.

Many French people dream of the day when a group of bold visionaries will rise, capable of supporting the emergence of a new world equilibrium and of returning their country, the country of the Enlightenment, to the place it has unfortunately lost in the international community. France must rediscover its freedom of choice as quickly as possible and no longer allow its “allies,” who do not wish us well, its “friends” of convenience, or various pressure groups, to decide its destiny.

The French people must quite simply recover their liberty, that of expressing themselves first and foremost. Down with censors, blackmailers, gurus, and intellectual terrorists: they have no place in the country of reason and liberty.”

Barring a victorious return of the Enlightenment, which would also have to handle all the ploys of the most obscure digital networks, Alain Chouet, Michel Raimbaud, and Anas Alexis Chebis do not call for a return to a long-lost age. Their statements represent a number of approaches, or even prolegomena, for the deconstruction of spontaneous, ideological, and propagandist phenomenologies. This is true promotion of a new critical spirit in the service of modern crises.

GASTON TO THE RESCUE!

This non-exhaustive description of some of the devices used in the phenomenology of Syrian war discourse shows how they prevent and present an obstacle to a calm, balanced, and rational understanding of a major event in contemporary international relations. They have taken French foreign policy in improvised, emotional, and truly ideological directions. They have presented an obstacle—an epistemological obstacle—to other more reasoned, more developed, and fairer alternatives.

The concept of the epistemological obstacle was formulated and developed by philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, published in 1938. It designates something that places itself between the academic's desire for knowledge and the object of study. This obstacle misleads by producing various immediate, affective, and pre-scientific phenomenologies of discourse. For Bachelard, however, these are not external to the act of knowledge but rather form an intrinsic part of the act of knowledge, which thus imagines explanations to be later refuted.

Applied to the effort of rational, even academic, understanding of the reality of the civil-global war in Syria, Bachelard's concept advocates four imperatives: achieve intellectual and affective catharsis, reform one's mind, refuse all arguments of authority, and disturb one's reason. In the first chapter of *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Émile Durkheim warns the researcher of the risk of error that he runs in entering the social and political sphere, where the sociologist exposes himself to being subjected to a sociological pseudoscience already in use among social actors, just as he also exposes himself to retaining his own thoughts, practices and interests as a social actor.

In sociology and in all other sciences, including those with a greatest focus on the non-human world such as chemistry and physics, the whole scientific approach must in fact transcend epistemological obstacles that prevent its progress by trapping it in errors that are caused not so much by difficulties internal to the object of study as by the very resources and tools of scientific thought itself.

Gaston Bachelard again: “Science is totally opposed to opinion, not just in principle but equally in its need to come to full fruition. If it happens to justify opinion on a particular point, it is for reasons other than those that are the basis of opinion; opinion's right is therefore always to be wrong. Opinion *thinks* badly; it does not *think* but instead *translates* needs into knowledge. By referring to objects in terms of their use, it prevents itself from knowing them. Nothing can be founded on opinion: we must start by destroying it. Opinion is the first obstacle that has to be surmounted. It is not enough for example to rectify opinion on specific points, so maintaining provisional common knowledge like some kind of provisional morality. The scientific mind forbids us to have an opinion on questions we do not understand and cannot formulate clearly. Before all else, we have to be able to pose problems. And in scientific life, whatever people may say, problems do not pose themselves. It is indeed having this *sense of the problem* that marks out the true scientific mind. For a scientific mind, all knowledge is an answer to a question. If there has been no question, there can be no scientific knowledge. Nothing is self-evident. Nothing is given. Everything is constructed.”⁷

PROGRESS TO CONSTRUCTION IN ASTANA AND GENEVA

The “Astana II” talks—which brought the military leaders of the rebellion together with the Syrian authorities under the auspices of Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara in the Kazakh capital on February 16, 2017—did not of course achieve any definitive progress. However, this new meeting consolidated the achievements of “Astana I” (January 26) in relation to three military issues: consolidation of the ceasefire implemented following the liberation of Aleppo the previous December; exchanging detainees for rebel-held hostages; and conditions of amnesty for armed groups agreeing to hand in their weapons.

But the most lasting achievement of these two meetings resides less in their immediate impact than in their working methods. The Russian diplomatic service had the excellent idea of inviting Staffan de Mistura—the United Nations special envoy for the Syrian crisis, who presides over the process in Geneva—and including him fully in discussions. From his initial position as “invited observer,” the senior United Nations diplomat was able to provide the full benefit of his experience on the ground, and his extensive diplomatic skills, to play a very active, even proactive role of mediation between the representatives of the armed rebellion and the Syrian authorities.

Sergey Lavrov, head of the Russian diplomatic service, was thus able to explain that the Astana talks did not compete with those of the United Nations, but were rather convergent, even complementary, to those in Geneva. And if the devil is always in the details, everyone noted that it was indeed at Astana that

7 Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2002), 25.

representatives of the rebellion agreed—for the very first time—to be physically in the same room as the legitimate Syrian authorities.

This step forward even opened up muted confrontation within the new US administration, as the Americans—furious at the Russian success—immediately wanted to punish Staffan de Mistura by spreading rumors of his forthcoming departure from the head of the Geneva negotiating team. However, the pragmatists' more realist analysis prevailed. How could they justify firing de Mistura, who had already called for negotiations to resume in Geneva on February 23? And most importantly, who would replace him? After Kofi Annan, who had dealt with the teething issues of this diplomatic mission, judged to be “the most difficult in the world,” and Lakhdar Brahimi, whose proximity to Saudi Arabia prevented him from gaining the ear of Damascus, Staffan de Mistura had not until now proven unworthy to carry out his dangerous mission. Far from it!

As a result, and despite pressure from the old American neocons still in the State Department and the Pentagon, Staffan de Mistura was able to keep his post and persist in keeping the Geneva talks alive despite all the difficulties. Here again, working methods outweigh advances, which will never be quick or spectacular. We need only recall the laborious discussions leading to the creation of the “Contact Group” in response to the Balkan war, which enabled signature of the Dayton Accords—on December 14, 1995—that brought an end to the inter-ethnic fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The two Astana summits have provided the opportunity to *focus on the commitment of the different parties to curb the use of force and promote the political process*, as head of the Russian diplomatic service Sergey Lavrov expressed with satisfaction. By explaining that the talks in Geneva had to be more “inclusive” in order to include other countries as part of this “contact group” approach, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Moscow has continued to emphasize the complementarity of Astana and Geneva, even convincing Washington of the aptness of such an approach.

On its side, Tehran has also been sending out increased signs of appeasement in the direction of Riyadh in order to explain the conditions of its engagement in Syria, which is intended not to stoke an indirect war against Saudi Arabia, but with the primary objective of neutralizing terrorist groups that threaten the whole region, including the Wahabi monarchy.

The Turkish agenda is more difficult to reconcile with this “contact group” logic even if it may—in time—be part of a common approach to resolving the crisis. By engaging its armed forces against the settlement of Al-Bab, the nerve and historic center of Syria's Kurdish regions, then against Raqqa—the seat of ISIS in Syria, a city with a Sunni majority—Ankara wants to nip in the bud any kind of territorial continuity across an unlikely Kurdish entity encompassing the regions held by the PJAK in Iran, Iraq's quasi-autonomous Kurdistan, Syria's PYD, and the PKK in Turkey. In time again, this desire could transform into, if not come into

line with, those of Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and of course Ankara.

The slow process of resolving the Kurdish question thus brings us back to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and the territorial disputes caused by the various Sèvres and Locarno agreements, intended to rebuild the Middle East following the break-up of the Ottoman Empire at the close of the First World War. Unfortunately for the Kurds—and they are perfectly aware of this—they will once again bear the cost of achieving a new stability across the main tectonic plates in this region. Following the failed military coup on July 14, 2016, Ankara has moved closer to Moscow, though without going so far as to break its historic alliance with the United States and NATO, nor fully reconciling with Baathist Syria. In this context, is Turkey able to comprehend that it must give up its dreams of re-establishing its great Sultanate?

Either way, the convergence of Astana, Geneva, and even Ankara if its position becomes more realist, could release the Syrian civil-global war from its impossible situation. One additional, and by no means unimportant factor, can be added to this hopeful perspective: the replacement at the head of the United Nations (UN) of the bland Ban Ki-Moon—the Americans' man—with Portuguese diplomat António Guterres, who is clearly determined to restore color to the global organization. The new head of the UN recently issued a forthright reminder that an effective response to the current migration crisis requires making "increased conflict-prevention capacity" a priority, and seeking to resolve ongoing conflicts!

The new UN Secretary-General added: "we must invest in social cohesion in societies that are becoming multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural. We must strengthen states, institutions, and civil societies." This is precisely what France, Great Britain, and the United States did not do by dismantling Libya, as Washington and London had done to Iraq in 2003.

In seeking to achieve in Syria what they achieved in Iraq and Libya, the United States and their allies demonstrate their ceaseless desire to break nation states in order to replace them with micro states like Kosovo and South Sudan, with their well-known disastrous consequences. After more than six years of an extremely bloody war in Syria, it may be that finally—finally—Washington understands that consolidating nation states in the Middle East will not only allow for the return of some stability, but also enable the battle against contemporary terrorism, the hidden face of globalization, to be fought more effectively.