***A Glimmer of Hope at Coexistence for the Fratricidal Syrians***

***Last week a secret but very interesting meeting took place in Kifissia: around twenty Syrian representatives of both the Assad regime and the opposition, as well as many neutral actors, sat around the same table to discuss a possible "third road" to peace and national reconciliation after almost twelve years of fratricidal war.***

***A complex endeavour - even for all these people to acquire visas, travel (some furtively) and assemble together safely in one room is a considerable operation. After all, a number of the attendees traveled to Greece from Syria and many others from Turkey, Europe and the Arab Gulf States, where they live in self-exile.***

***Before I was called by ELIAMEP, with the support of which the summit took place, I did not know much about this European, or perhaps more aptly German, diplomatic initiative, which is supposed to be parallel and complementary to the official (and unfortunately interminable) meetings of what is known as the "Constitutional Commission" under the auspices of the UN in Geneva.***

***It is an attempt at backdoor diplomacy that began five years ago, in 2017, with the signing of the ‘Code of Conduct for Syrian Coexistence’ in Berlin, and is financed among others by wealthy Syrian individuals living in Germany and by some European governments. It is a Code that emphasises the cessation of hostilities, equality before the law, amnesty towards captives and prisoners, defence of the territorial integrity of Syria and of course – the most difficult point – the withdrawal of all foreign forces and armies. It is a code that states there are no winners and losers, that neither side is innocent, that justice is one thing and retribution another, and that the most important task ahead is to heal the nation’s wounds and to save all that can still be saved.***

***All of this is aimed overcoming rampant factionalism and striving for national reconciliation "from below" through civil society: instead of us savvy Europeans waiting for Assad to find accommodation with the opposition, a difficult task bordering on the impossible after so much bloodshed, the summit impetus is to instead arrange an analogous forum with people representing various powerful groups (religious minorities, clans, private interest groups, historical families) within Syrian society, but also the diaspora, even if some type of resolution is to be found through side channels. As one of the German organisers, Danny, told me, "we don't have weapons, so we try to help them with words and money.”***

***Of course, I had my doubts. It’s all very well to speak of coexistence, but what chance of success does such a conference have when Syria remains fragmented, enfeebled, swarmed by local and foreign armies? Is this all just a public relations exercise, a little shindig to soothe ‘civilised’ Europeans’ conscience, while Syrian civilians continue to be killed and refugees drown by the thousands in the invisible trenches of "Fortress Europe”?***

***But curiosity overcame my skepticism, even as my wife was expecting our child within days. Where else would I have the opportunity to meet so many Syrians of disparate loyalties gathered together? For many years I have been writing about this accursed civil war by proxy, with hundreds of thousands dead and millions of refugees, and every time some positive development gives some glimmer of hope for a path to peace, the bombs start falling again. How much longer can this last? So, I took my notebook (cameras and cell phones were prohibited) and went up to Kifissia.***

***What I saw, in the end, pleasantly surprised me: around the table were people of completely different backgrounds and agendas - among them a Sunni clan chief from Hasaka in the North, another from Quneitra, Kurds, Gezidis, Druze, Christians, several Alawite allies of Assad (among them a couple of former government officials), businessmen, a newspaper editor, two or three regime lawyers, but also Iman, a formidable judge from Idlib, the last stronghold of the opposition after the fall of Aleppo.***

***There was of course plenty of tension in the room, and one could immediately understand that the atmosphere was not amicable – there wasn't a single person who hadn't lost someone in the war. And when the conversation turned to the most pressing issues – such as, for example, why the release of the tens of thousands of prisoners in Assad's prisons had suddenly become gridlocked - the mutual distrust was evident: one attendee would say "we are reviewing 22,000 cases!" and another riposted "yes, but you have only released 600, half of whom have been locked up again”!***

***But what evidently united them all was the common impulse to rebuild their lives in their destroyed homeland: as one attendee told us, 80% of Syrians do not want either Assad, the opposition, the Russians, the Turks or the American patrons – a silent minority, exhausted and desiring peace, the repatriation of their friends and relatives, and a chance at a better life.***

***During the breaks you would see motley groups huddle together making jokes in Arabic, smoking and drinking their tea or coffee. From what we have learned, beyond the pronouncements and rhetoric, the central offer of this particular forum is behind-the-scenes mediation between the belligerents, which has already led to the exchange of hundreds of captives and the release of hostages and prisoners.***

***In other words, all sides are exhausted, battlefronts are static, the prolongation of the war only favours the foreign occupiers and everyone is now clamouring for a way out. This is why Assad turns a blind eye to the participation of some of his own people in the forum, and also why the islamic insurgents of Idlib will not shoot their own participants as traitors to jihad.***

***I asked them about the rumours of Assad's rapprochement with Erdoğan: a cold silence suddenly fell on the room, and no one would give me a direct answer. Such a development would be disastrous for many of the participants who have found refuge in Turkey, as well as for the Kurds, whose respite from a new Turkish invasion is only temporary.***

***From what I'm reading, these are credible rumours and some opposition figures are preparing to relocate as it appears Erdogan is gunning for a deal to allow at least some of the nearly 4 million Syrian refugees to be repatriated before the 2023 election. But let’s be honest, everyone is looking for the third way to peace, and someone will have to edify the foreign patrons and sponsors who have set up their own bases and operations on Syrian soil and are comfortable with perpetuating the slaughter.***

***Who will expel them, now that they have imposed themselves as "saviours" in a foreign land? Only last week the Israelis bombed Aleppo again, the Russians bombed Idlib, the Turks have bombed the Kurds, the Americans have bombed pro-Iranian militias on the border with Iraq, and so on – without any of them, unfortunately, thinking to ask first the wishes of Syrian civil society and without adhering to the tenets of the Code of Coexistence.***