

Thinking about Syria from Europe: Chemical weapons and the lesson of history

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I ‘Just the same as 100 years ago,’ our neighbour, a medical doctor, murmured, as we were finishing our dinner. It was an evening in Paris, the end of August looming, and my husband and I were the guests of our neighbours. ‘You think so too?’ I responded. ‘It’ll be 2014 next year. Won’t it be exactly 100 years ago?’ said the doctor’s wife. We exchanged an uneasy glance. We were thinking of Europe in the period of World War I, a century before. But what we meant when we said ‘the same’ was not present-day Europe. Our conversation had just turned to the topic of Syria and the general situation in the Middle East. This was what brought our neighbours back, with a deep sigh, to the Europe of 1914. I felt oppressed knowing that the same thought that had recurred to me was also seizing Europeans. It had already happened to me more than once to find myself unwittingly thinking about the Middle East in terms of what had happened

to Europe in the past.

France this August was flooded with news reports on the suspected use of chemical weapons by the government of Syria led by President Assad in the confusion of a prolonged civil war in the country. First reported, over many consecutive days, was the tension over the United Nations’ intent to send its delegation to Syria to investigate this, which the Syrian government fiercely resisted. Then, just when the Syrian government finally allowed the UN mission into the country, a massive poison gas attack occurred in a suburb of Damascus; the Syrian government was suspected of being responsible. As the initial report came in of a huge number of citizens being killed, tension built up in France, too¹. This dinner with our neighbours was the day after the attack. Although we had not yet had the full picture of the incident, it seemed to weigh heavily on our mind. Our conversation that evening started from the subject of

¹ According to information released from the US government by 30 August, the attack of 21 August killed 1,429 people (one third of whom were children). The suspicion that the Syrian government was using chemical weapons had grown for some time before this incident. The British and French governments had since April 2013 been sending letters about this to the UN.

poison gas weapons, which came up when we were nibbling appetizers in the library.

Our hosts told us that they had both had a grandfather who had been injured in poison gas attacks by Germans in WWI. The doctor showed us a small diary that his grandfather had kept in the trenches. The leaves of a brown leather-covered diary from a hundred years ago, filled with entries in small letters, written in a meticulous hand, adorned with beautiful illustrations and photographs, were turned before our eyes. Suddenly, I was thinking about Antoine, a character in *Les Thibault*, a novel by the French Nobel laureate writer Martin du Gard. Antoine is the elder brother of Jacques Thibault, the main character of the novel, who as a devoted revolutionary becomes an anti-war activist and dies tragically from injuries in an airplane accident. Antoine himself is a medical doctor. Towards the end of the story, Antoine is in hospital, gassed in an attack while serving as a medical officer. He is dying no less agonizing a death than his brother's. He observes the progress of the damage to his body from the effects of the gas poisoning, leading unmistakably to death: he records all this in his diary². The story of our neighbour's family overlapped with the story of a French family eternalized in a novel; I seemed to be glimpsing the long shadow that the memory of poison gas casts over the country. I also recalled reading that, on the eve of the Nazi occupation, the residents of Paris were ordered to carry gas masks outdoors as a precaution against an imminent German attack. It was indeed gas masks that foreboded the beginnings of a dark age for Paris and the people living there.

A few days after the dinner, President Hollande had

let the whole world know that France was prepared to take military action to punish President Assad and his clique. This did not surprise me. For it appeared to me that this was not unrelated to the nation's experience, to the remembrances and the reflections that such experience would inevitably bring up³.

It was not only the use of poison gas attack that reminded us of the first world war. The Arab Spring, which started in Tunisia in 2010, the movement demanding democracy which swept the entire region of the Middle East, was already reminiscent of Europe in the period around WWI when she was washed by a huge tide of democratization. At the time, what was seen in Europe was a raging antagonism between the reformers who pushed for democratization of the political, social and economic systems and conservatives defending the *anciens régimes*, with the reformers often finding an ally in a third political force, communists, or revolutionaries, who were vehemently at odds with the conservatives. This triangular relationship, the alliances and relative strengths in the three political forces, varied with the type of regime and the kind of political situation in place. Such variety in the political formations from one spot to the next, coupled with other geopolitical factors, in particular the influence of the two pan-movements, Pan-German and Pan-Slavic, complicated the cleavage that divided Europe, so that any single state could be torn apart inside while yet entrenched on one side of a great European-wide schism where groups of states were pitted against one another. This complication increased the chance of violence in many places, employed either as a means

² The 'Epilogue' of the novel, the part which tells the story of Antoine's last days, was completed in February 1939, just before the outbreak of WWII.

³ On the initiative of France, the use of chemical weapons in international conflicts was banned by the Geneva Protocol of 1925. The 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention went further by prohibiting altogether the production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons and their precursors. Syria, however, never signed the 1993 treaty.

of oppression or of defiance. The Middle East of today presents a similar pattern of political confrontation, in which pro-democratization forces rise up against *anciens régimes*, and frequently fight side by side with Islamist groups, the political forces often being held responsible for terrorism. So far, the picture is almost the same as the one observed in Europe a hundred years ago, except that the Islamist aspiring to realize an Islamist State has replaced the communist dreaming of Socialist Revolutions. That such tripartite battles fought in different configurations in different places, complicated by seemingly incurable sectarian hostility, aggregate to form two big camps transcending borders is also the same as was seen in Europe a hundred years ago, though we have the sectarianism of Shi'a and Sunni today instead of the tribalism of pan-movements which then swayed to and fro over Europe.

Then what happened in Europe was that, the very moment the forces on the side of democracy were about to consolidate their victory in the aftermath of WWI, anti-democracy forces resurfaced. They even began to take the offensive with a new type of dictatorship, that of the Fascist, replacing the old, obsolete dictatorships. The decisive event for the Fascist forces in establishing their offensive across Europe was the Spanish Civil War. If we think of the present situation in the Middle East, it is perhaps the Syrian Civil War that can be compared to it in terms of the scale and intensity of the battles, prolongation of the war and involvement of foreign actors. In the Spanish Civil War, the Spanish Republic, a new democracy born in the last splendour of the great democratization movement in Europe, was

overthrown in a rebellion led by Franco, a former royalist military general turned into a Fascist. In the course of its struggle against the rebels, the republic had communists on its side as well as attracting a number of volunteers, foreign soldiers from all over the world, both communist and non-communist. The three years of fierce fighting to defend the republic, however, ended in vain. The victors were the Fascists and another state under a dictatorship was born.

Now, we are close witnesses of the following development: when the massacre of countless civilians by poison gas was reported, President Hollande responded quickly. He announced his determination to punish President Assad and his faction by military means and never flinched from this line⁴. This and subsequent developments made me think about France's problems with – her profound confusion over – the Spanish Civil War. This War did not tear apart Spain alone, but the Third Republic of France also. It had repercussions on French domestic politics, resulting in an escalation of the already inflamed hostility between the left and the right, while driving the then leftist government to its half-baked, infamous foreign policy. The foreign policy that the French left adopted at the time was one of abandoning the Spanish democrats to die while spurring on reactionary forces within France. It could even be said that this policy was crucial in preparing the external and internal conditions that would make France allow the Nazi occupation in the years to come. From France, many young people departed for Spain, disillusioned by their own government's policy, to fight as volunteers for the cause of democracy. No French political leader, in particular none on the left, is likely to reflect

⁴ The success of France's military intervention in Mali in January 2013 and the tradition among the French socialists of supporting humanitarian intervention would have underlain this stand. In addition, France and Syria had had a special relationship, as follows: 1) Syria was once under a French occupation; 2) the two states had long been in dispute over Lebanon, Syria's neighbouring country; 3) France had been substantially committed to the support of Syria's anti-government groups since early in this civil war. France was considered more likely to turn aggressively on Syria than on any other country.

on French diplomacy in this period without a sense of trauma. It would hardly be surprising if President Hollande, a direct descent of the socialist leadership who presided over the left-wing government at the time, were conscious of avoiding the regret of a similar policy⁵.

II

With regard to the varied responses of the major Western nations to the Syrian Civil War, it was not only France's resolved attitude to the Syrian government that had evoked a sense of déjà vu. Flashbacks of the behaviour of, and the circumstances created by, the same Western nations in the era of the Spanish Civil War kept occurring in my mind. As for the option of military intervention in Syria, it had been on the international agenda for some time. However, there was little prospect that any military action would get the backing of a UN resolution because of the expected vetoes from China and Russia. Correspondingly, the focus had already shifted to the possibility of military action, outside the UN's authorization, by a team of nations led by the US, the UK, and France. In their response to the 21 August poison gas massacre, these three nations at last seemed to be on the move. What followed next was, however, that Britain, the most eloquent advocate for military strikes against the Assad regime, dropped out of the team, when the British government asked for a parliamentary endorsement of military action – which incidentally was not a required procedure for a launch of a military strike – only to unexpectedly lose the vote. France immediately responded to this débacle by restating her unshaken will on military sanctions, while America started to talk about asking for a vote by Congress – not a mandatory procedure there, either – hinting that

she was now seeing the chance of rolling back from the military option. At this point, Russia stepped in, with a proposal which America accepted. They agreed on a deal to avoid military sanctions against the Assad regime. The French case for punishing President Assad was left in the air. In any event, France lacked the capacity to implement her will by herself. Unsurprisingly, the whole event gave the impression that France had either been made a fool of or had been made a slavish follower of the US.

However, if we look back on the behaviour of the same three nations in the period of the Spanish Civil War and at the consequences of their actions and inactions, all such talk of foolishness or slavishness takes on a different complexion. At the time, Britain, France and America had taken refuge in what they called a non-intervention policy. The excuse was to avoid war and the threat of Communism. It was Britain who had the leading role. France was then under the same Popular Front government as the Spanish Republic, led by a coalition of all the important leftist and centrist political parties; nevertheless, she simply followed Britain. Let me quote a passage that conveys the anger, irritation and sense of urgency that were felt at the time, though, I am afraid, the quotation is lengthy and contains facts unfamiliar to many of us nowadays.

The British leaders decided on an embargo against sending arms, planes, tanks or ammunition to 'either side' in Spain, knowing that the republicans were represented by the legitimate Government elected by popular will and that Italy and Germany, through Portugal, were supplying and would continue to supply the rebels with everything they needed, including

⁵ President Hollande's hardline policy towards Syria had the backing of the Socialist Party and the Green Party, both members of the government coalition.

fully equipped units of troops and technical advisers ... The British policy, in effect, was to permit Franco to obtain, without putting up cash but by mortgaging future Spain, all the arms and soldiers and food he needed, while the republicans were to be shut off from supplies and slaughtered⁶. Not only did the British plan this chicanery, but they forced the French to take the initiative [since the ‘Spanish Government could get supplies only through France’], under pain of a double threat: (a) a refusal to guarantee the eastern frontier on the Rhine. (b) a devaluation of the franc, controlled by the London exchange ... And if this were not enough, the British coerced twenty-six other nations into signing the non-intervention pact, including Italy and Germany ... Who cared about Madrid just then? Aggressors, the world over, were given *carte blanche*⁷.

And this non-intervention policy is said to have meant the death of the French republic and determined the nation’s course, leading ineluctably to its surrender to Nazi Germany. The quotation comes from a book published in 1942, by the American journalist Elliot Paul. The author, who lived in a popular district in central Paris in the 1920s and ‘30s, reflects on the time⁸.

There comes vividly to my memory an evening in November. My friends in France were gathered around me in the Caveau bar to hear about my friends in Spain, who, fighting gallantly, already were doomed to destruction. We were still in the

compass of that most terrible of all years, 1936.

In October, Italian troops, airplanes, tanks, artillery and ammunition were being rushed to the support of Franco, and German technicians, materials and supplies were freely at the Rebel’s disposal. The ruling clique of England had already made its choice and was keeping France and the United States in line ... The excuse was ‘communism’, which did not then exist in Spain, and the slogan was ‘war must be prevented from spreading at any cost’. That the cost was the annihilation of free men and innocent women in a rising republic, the surrounding of France on all sides by fascist armies and governments (Germany, Belgium, Italy and Spain), the opportunity for the dictators to train their armies, try out and perfect their equipment and experiment on a helpless civilian population (as at Guernica), and the despair of workers everywhere, did not deter the Cliveden group [in England] assisted by their counter-parts in France

It was not so discouraging that fascists in every land were scheming and battling for fascism. What else could be expected? *What dealt our pre-war world its mortal blow was the supine cowardice and hypocrisy of so-called democrats who played into their hands and sealed the death warrants of countless innocent millions.*

It is then even said as follows:

⁶ France under President Hollande, together with Britain, ended the arms embargo on Syria and liberated arms supplies to Syria’s anti-government forces. (This happened as the EU, at the strong insistence of these two countries, decided to lift its arms embargo on Syria in June 2013.) They had been urging the US to follow suit as well. The behaviour of Britain and France is surely different from what was seen of these two countries at the time of the Spanish Civil War.

⁷ Elliot Paul, *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, Kindle edition, 2012, originally published 1942, ‘Of Non-Intervention’ para.34-37 (italics in the original).

⁸ *Ibid.*, ‘Of Non-Intervention’ para.1-3 (italics added).

*From the treachery called non-intervention
... neither France nor liberty could raise their
heads or staunch the flow of life's blood from
their hearts.*

Unsurprisingly, the author's views on the leader of the then Popular Front government of France are harsh. Leon Blum of the Socialist Party was the prime minister in these critical days. Blum is known as the first Socialist to have become the head of government in France and famous for his radical programme in the field of social policy. However, in the context of France's trajectory from her half-baked, confused reaction to the Spanish Civil War to her eventual fall under Nazi Germany, he is nothing more than a sad symbol of misjudgement and humiliation. Paul's comment on him is filled with regret.

While Madrid was making her heroic stand, Englishmen of the ruling class were helping to put non-intervention across. Only one Frenchman might have stopped it. His name was Blum, and he failed to act, or rather he acted like a craven. It is all very well to say that he might have believed he was keeping France out of war. War is bad, but it is better for self-respecting men to die while they still feel like men than to become cowards and hypocrites and the laughing stock of an unscrupulous enemy who will make them fight or enslave them after they are demoralized⁹.

Those who know what fate was awaiting Blum shortly afterwards may be shaken by this passage. He was, as a Jew, sent to a concentration camp.

III

If Leon Blum in France was one from whose example President Hollande could learn something, Britain for her part had Baldwin and Chamberlain. It is unlikely that their images ever leave the mind of Mr Cameron, the Prime Minister of Great Britain. This time, however, it was against the will of the Prime Minister that Britain took up its old role: in the event, Parliament blocked his intention. When Mr Cameron called Parliament back from its recess and asked its support for the government's launching military action in Syria, Parliament answered with a vote of 'nay', which was an unprecedented result for this kind of motion¹⁰. Bitter experiences with the nation's previous war (i.e., against Iraq) and worries about the increased danger of terrorism were said to have affected this result. Almost the same reasoning can apply to the circumstances surrounding the non-intervention policy in the 1930s: the general mood of weariness with war, coupled with worries over the threat believed to be posed by Communism, was rendered a legitimator of the policy. This rebellion from the British Parliament reversed the tide: the move to military intervention in Syria quickly lost its momentum. Was I the only one who felt that we were seeing the spectre of '[t]he ruling clique of England [who had] made its choice and was keeping France and the United States in line' in the 1930s?

How the actions of 'Englishmen of the ruling class' of this period appeared to the eyes of contemporaries is summed up by George Orwell in an essay published in 1940¹¹:

British foreign policy between 1931 and 1939

⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Of Non-Intervention' para.33.

¹⁰ It was reported that Hollande described this as Cameron's 'school boy error.'

¹¹ George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn', *Why I write*, London: Penguin books, 1984. The essay was originally published in 1940.

is one of the wonders of the world. Why? What had happened? What was it that at every decisive moment made every British statesman do the wrong thing with so unerring an instinct?¹²

The answer to this question by Orwell might sound apologetic to the ears of the American journalist quoted earlier. For what Orwell saw in these members of the British elite was ‘not treachery, or physical cowardice.’ They were not even ‘the cynical scoundrels’ that they sometimes seem to be. What marked them instead was ‘stupidity, unconscious sabotage, an infallible instinct for doing the wrong thing¹³.’

In the eyes of Orwell, too, their response to the Spanish Civil War was the test. This then blatantly manifested the ‘political ignorance’ of the British ruling class, which prevented them so persistently from seeing the character of Fascism and of Hitler. Hence, there were Members of Parliament who ‘cheer[ed] the news that British ships, bringing food to the Spanish Republican Government, had been bombed by Italian aeroplanes’, while there were ‘generals and admirals [who were] unable to grasp [the] fact’ which even average workers at that time could understand easily, that Franco’s victory would mean a strategic disaster for Great Britain. If there was anything that the English ruling class could easily grasp, it would have to be at best their immediate economic gains or losses, or something of the kind. Even after it became apparent that war was inevitable, until the very last minute before the war, ‘the whole moneyed class’ in England, clinging to their business interests and afraid of changing their way of life, continued to ignore the true nature of Fascism and the need to prepare for war. Moreover, the press, with its income depending

after all on commercial advertisements, kept feeding the public ‘false optimism’. This is the situation that existed in Britain before 1939.

However, Orwell alleged that the British people, once resolved to fight, would exhibit a strong sense of national solidarity, and a spirit of self-sacrifice, in every stratum of society, regardless of class. In particular, Orwell notes, the British elite in time of war are known to get themselves killed more often than any other stratum of the nation. Orwell took this as testimony that they were not traitors, nor cowards. In his opinion, their morals were still sound. They were not corrupt, but just helplessly incapable of seeing reality¹⁴. Perhaps this is true.

I am not a student of Britain at this particular period or a follower of the latest developments in the country’s affairs. I am familiar only with the political events of a relatively recent period of British history. However, this was enough for me to notice something about Britain, if only vaguely. It is something that, if it appeared in America, may be expressed through what is known as isolationism, which periodically sweeps over the country; we might say that in Britain also it is this something that has been providing a basis for all the commonplace talk of British insularity. It is possible that this something has led to the ad-hocism and lack of strategy in British foreign policy, which seem even to have been the hallmark of British diplomacy. (It is said that even the British Empire was acquired in ‘a fit of absent-mindedness.’) Moreover, all this seems to me connected with the crassness or recklessness that the British tend to show when blinded by present prosperity or any prospect of making a fortune. For such happy, and foolhardy,

¹² Ibid., p.32.

¹³ Ibid., p.37.

¹⁴ The quotation and argument from Orwell above are from *ibid.*, pp.35-37, 52.

blindness, any observer of British politics should be on the alert.

This summer, I visited London from Paris – my first return trip to Britain after many years. I was stunned to see the prosperity of the city. The air was filled with the kind of energy that you would expect to find in a series of Asian bazaars if they had been transplanted in patches here and there around Britain. The city was flooded with people, goods, and entertainments, and with all kinds of showy symbols of success. Thinking back on the look of prosperity in a city which seemed unconcerned by any chaotic or tragic situation unfolding in the outside world, which seemed to be telling the world that commercialism is all that counts, Britain's revulsion against military intervention in Syria becomes less surprising. In fact, it may not mean that the British have become pacifists or opportunists, or anything of the kind. Rather, it is possible that the insight into the British national character granted to Orwell is relevant here. In this regard, if we simply assumed that the penetration of the global economy and the arrival of new immigrants had fundamentally changed Britain since Orwell's time and demolished the very grounds that sustained his analysis, we might be misled. Observations of similar 'globalization' already existed 100 years ago. Globalization had been a part of the British condition for quite some time when Orwell produced the above analysis. Hence, if Orwell were alive today, he might argue as follows: Insofar as Britain has remained the same since the time he wrote, it may happen again that she will be awoken to an action that is belatedly but nonetheless telling.

IV

Let's go back to the present problem of Syria's chemical weapons. President Putin of Russia, a close ally of President Assad, put forward a proposal as if

calling checkmate in a chess game, which America swallowed at once, either willingly or reluctantly. It was to make America drop her plan for military action in exchange for Syria's agreeing to abandon her chemical weapons under the supervision of an international organization. But this was not only to replace the problem of her undeniable use of chemical weapons by the question of what should be done with the existing stock of chemical weapons. It also meant the declaration of a policy of non-intervention towards Syria, as well as commitment to the prolongation of the Assad regime. It was as if international society specifically promised President Assad that there would be no military intervention for the time being, and even that, while the process of disposing of the chemical weapons is under way, international society has a stake in the continuation of the regime. This policy would be far from a neutral one. Rather, it was a policy moving away from the objective of all the talks on sanctions against the Assad regime.

Then, the worry arises that the present case may have established a precedent for the practice of some pernicious logic: that the very act of using chemical weapons leads to the survival of the political force that dared to use them, by subjecting it to the oversight of an international organization (The same may also apply to certain acts involving nuclear weapons). If only the responsible party makes a gesture to submit to pressure from a reproachful international society, agreeing to accept any internationally warranted inspection or disposal program for the condemned weapons, the international society becomes committed to the party's survival. At least, it is likely to survive as long as the international organization assigned a task in such a program continues to be involved. Here, the party originally placed under the threat of punishment emerges as the one in the advantageous position – this is indeed the paradox that results from treating security issues mainly, if not solely, as the problem

of controlling the use, possession and dissemination of weapons of mass destruction¹⁵. Still, as far as the present instance is concerned, it could have been the case that if Britain had passed the resolution on military action and there had emerged an international regime capable of launching a military strike against Syria at any time, Syria would have been placed under more compelling pressure, and the norms of international society which inhibit the use of chemical weapons would have been better served – they would at least have been saved from the risk of total disparagement, even if the world ultimately had had to be satisfied with the deal that it has now. However, in a situation where Britain unexpectedly dropped out of the prospective alliance for military action, America apparently began to back off, and France just looked like a fool left high and dry, the proposal that came from Russia appeared as something that had fully exploited the disarray of these nations, to the advantage of the very party that should have been on the defensive as the target of sanctions, to the point of achieving what it could not have desired more.

Yet it is unarguable that getting rid of chemical weapons is in itself to be welcomed. But we should never be diverted by this from the fact that chemical weapons were actually used, from seeing the nature of the act of using chemical weapons and what kind of regime could ever dare to commit such an act.

What seems to be a common understanding about poison gas weapons is that they cause their victims humanly unacceptable physical suffering. By virtue of this, they become a powerful symbol of what

should not happen, and also of what should not have happened. For example, to the French, they should be existing as a symbol that evokes the memories of incidents that should never have happened and should not be repeated in the future, such as the gruesome battlefields in WWI and the nation's acquiescence in the face of Nazism.

But if we ponder further, we should be saying that such poison gas weapons also symbolize the occurrence of something that should not occur. That is, they signal a state of things where something forbidden is unleashed. In fact, the use of poison gas seems to be the kind of act for which we cannot conceive of any possible excuse. It seems to be an action that does not assume, but rather blatantly rejects, even mocks, the possibility as well as the need of justifying itself. (This may be a common feature to all the things that we call weapons of mass destruction, or WMD, such as nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. If any party uses these weapons fully intending to cause the consequences expected from them, there is no room for any defensive case to be made out for the user. In fact, if there is any logic in treating these categories of weapons differently from others, through designating them as WMD and so forth, it could be in this respect.) It should be seen as declaring the existence of pure malice on the part of the user, the kind of malice that does not know any reluctance to appear in broad daylight. If all this holds, the problem that shows in any threat, or actual use, of chemical weapons is not only the danger or harm that they can actually inflict upon us. Accordingly, the problem cannot be reduced to the issue of whether such weapons should or should not exist in a certain place or under the control of certain

¹⁵ The scenario that the author has identified before seems to be materializing. It is a scenario that leads to a world where the maintenance of global order is rendered a matter of controlling weapons of mass destruction and is pursued primarily through this means. On the logic of this scenario and the circumstances which seemed to warrant it, see the chapter titled 'Between Two Empires [Futatsu no teikoku no aida]', in Ikuko Toyonaga, *The Scope of Neoconservatism [Shinhoshushugi no sayō]*, Tokyo: Keisoshobo, 2008. The chapter was originally published in 2002 as a journal article.

people. (That is to say, the problem that concerns us will not be solved by the removal of specific stocks of WMD alone, from certain hands or even from the face of the earth.) What we must acknowledge is the presence of pure malice freed from all the humanly conceivable restraint, the expression of which we surely recognize in the very act of using poison gas as a weapon.

Such blazing ill will, aggressive and defiant, scornful of any attempt to place limits on human deed, employs various acts: its actions appear in different forms on different occasions. There is an unforgettable image which I saw on the news. It is the image of a boy from a certain city of Syria, a boy rescued from a school attacked by napalm-like incendiary bombs¹⁶. He is describing in a feeble voice how his burns hurt: Then, in the next scene, he almost bursts into tears, crying aloud in his weakness, ‘Why bomb us, knowing we are at school. Why?’ I was devastated: I realized that something beyond the physical pain was tormenting this boy, who was already suffering unbearable physical agony from the burns all over his body. His grief was so deep that he could not but voice his question, despite the bodily torment that must have made it difficult for him to speak at all. Wasn’t it the case that he was shocked to sense a malice that rejects all our attempts to understand it? He seemed indeed to be hurt and disconcerted by the very existence of such evil intent: that could suddenly turn on him (it could have been on any one) for its prey in the way that he had suffered it¹⁷.

When the involvement of pure malice is suspected,

there is always a possibility that any negotiation, deal or agreement will be pursued in vain. This should be the problem known by all of us: it must be understood well by all the participants in any ongoing talks, formal or informal, on the Syrian Civil War. It is another question, however, whether we are prepared to deal with this problem, ready to face and handle all the implication of such ominous prospect as stated above, not forgetting past experiences that hold lessons for us and warn us in time. In regard to the case that we have been discussing so far, our alertness concerning any such prospect may easily be lost or compromised in the face of the ever-blooming attractions of the great European cities, with their ever-increasing glitter and busyness. It is tricky that the extravagancies of such cities are not unrelated to the fact that these cities have served and are still serving as great repositories for the riches that flee from troubled countries all over the world: needless to say, the Arab countries in the turbulent Middle East are among them.

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¹⁶ It was reported that the attack looked like one by napalm bombs. The use of incendiary weapons is banned by an international treaty. (The United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons which came into effect in 1983 prohibits by its Protocol III the use of incendiary weapons against civilians, civilian objects and military targets near concentrations of civilians.) Syria has not signed this treaty.

¹⁷ Ian Pannell (Reporter) & Darren Conway (Cameraman), ‘Syria: Agony of victims of “napalm-like” school bombing’, *BBC News*, London: BBC, 30 September 2013, Available from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-24288698>. Full coverage of the story is: Ian Pannell (Reporter) & Darren Conway (Cameraman), *BBC Panorama: Saving Syria’s Children*, London: BBC, first broadcasted 30 September 2013.