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A long truce between the West and Islam



Giuseppe Cassini

Rome, in constant view of its majestic ruins, one could easily meditate on how a great power declines and falls. The United States is close to that brink: It is finding it harder and harder to preserve its overseas influence, especially in the greater Middle East. Julian, the enlightened emperor dubbed "the Apostate," fought bravely to stop the Roman decline in the 4th century, failed in that mission, and died pierced by a Persian arrow on the Mesopotamian frontier. Barack Obama, the enlightened president whom some fundamentalists also dub the Apostate, faces the same challenge: either succeed or suffer a dart from the "dark side" (launched by its vengeful prince, Dick Cheney).

Irony of history, the current "crescent of crisis" in the Greater Middle East runs more or less along the fractious line of the Asian borders of the Roman Empire. Obama has to tackle concurrently the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraqi stabilization, the Iranian nuclear program, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan quagmire.

On the eve of Obama's recent speech in Cairo, Amira Abbas, a student at Cairo University, where the U.S. president spoke, seemed to voice the frustration of Egyptian youth by exclaiming: "I don't understand why he's visiting. What does he have to say to the Muslim world?"

Well, dear Amira, he had to say a lot. That's why, after his speech, two contrasting voices were heard from the heart of the Islamic umma, or community of believers: one, coming from the extremists, exhorted jihad; the other, coming from the throngs of moderates, wanted Obama to deliver on his promises. The extremist voices were comparatively feeble, and that mattered: It meant a majority of Muslims were poised to accept new ideas from Washington, provided they were bold and far-reaching.

So, how can the U.S. president translate into policies the issues he raised in Cairo? Roula Khalaf provided something of an answer the following day, when she wrote in The Financial Times that "Obama called for a joint effort to create a new world where extremists no longer threatened Americans, US troops returned home, Israelis and Palestinians lived in secure states of their own and nuclear energy

was used only for peaceful purposes. It is an ambitious vision that would transform the Middle East, but it also raises expectations far beyond the U.S.'s ability to deliver."

Far beyond? It depends. If the president extricates himself from the Washington bureaucracy; if he turns a deaf ear to the lobbies in the capital; if, in short, he follows his own instinct, yes he can succeed.

In one sense, he's already succeeded in the first two phases of what could amount to a three-phase strategy. Phase 1: Denial: In April he went to Turkey to state that "the USA is not at war with Islam and will never be." Phase 2: Outreach: In June he went to Egypt to offer Islam a "new beginning." Phase 3 might be what we can call the Two-Track Forum. Imagine the impact if Obama proposed that Western countries and the 57 members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference meet in two separate but equally legitimate sessions: one limited to governments (like the 2002 Istanbul Forum) and one open to civil society - religious leaders, elders of clans, intellectuals, entrepreneurs and others.

Agenda items could be drawn from the successful 1975 Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: respect for sovereignty but also for human rights and freedoms; self-determination; the peaceful settlement of disputes; and a plea in favor of state secularism. Remember Obama's words in Cairo: "America doesn't presume to know what is best for everyone ... But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law; government that doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose."

What aim should this two-track forum seek? A final compact might be drafted with a realistic aim of agreeing to a 10-year long truce (or *hudna tawila*, in Arabic). This is a captivating concept inside Islam and understandable for any insurgent waging war from Africa to South Asia, and that includes Hamas and Hizbullah.

Why should the Islamic umma not accept such offer? After all, the fundamentalists are killing far more Muslims than they are Christians or Jews. What we've seen in recent years has been closer to an Islamic civil war than a clash between the West and Islam.

Would such a forum be too difficult to organize? We can compare the current clash to the religious war which ravaged Europe between 1618 and 1648. The Thirty-Year War ended only when the 10 major powers, plus 180 minor states of Europe, found the courage to set up the Congress of Westphalia, where they agreed to a series of multilateral treaties unprecedented in history. After three decades of conflict it was a unique feat of diplomatic skill. There was no internet and no telephone to help the envoys put together the peace treaties.

Where should the forum be convened? The ideal venue is Beirut, the most suitable place to straddle the borders dividing Western and Islamic civilizations.

A long truce is the minimum we must long for to earn enough time to face far more critical challenges, from extreme poverty to the catastrophic effects of climate change. All of us, Christians and Muslims and Jews, are living on borrowed time.

The Europeans are expecting Obama to think big. Being the son of two continents and culturally rooted in four, he is the only world statesman fit to lead us towards a reconciliation embedded in democracy.

* Published in Lebanon's THE DAILY STAR on June 3. Giuseppe Cassini is an Italian diplomat who served in Belgium, Algeria, Cuba, the United States, at the United Nations, and was ambassador to Somalia and Lebanon.

