

BBC Monitoring European has taken over my article published in the newspaper "L'Unità".

For the readers of my site, here is the text.

5 November 2012

Text of report by Italian newspaper L'Unita on 5 November

[Commentary by Italian Member of the European Parliament, former UN Under Secretary General Pino Arlacchi: "Syria, the Issue of Arms to the Rebels: 'Afghan Islamist Militia Groups Were Armed To Halt the USSR 30 Years Ago; Today the Mistake Is Being Repeated in Damascus'"]

What is happening in Syria today appears to be inconsistent with the maxim that history never repeats itself other than in the shape of a farce. An original tragedy that occurred in Afghanistan 30 years ago is being repeated today in the shape of an even greater tragedy. This, because we know from well-informed sources that most of the weapons sent to Syria by the United States and by its allies for the purpose of toppling Bashar al-Asad's regime are ending up in the hands of Islamist extremists who are absolutely akin to the Afghan Mojaheddin in the 1980s.

What happened back then?

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, setting up a friendly government in the country and altering the Cold War balances in the region. The United States, Saudi Arabia, and other countries thus decided to fund and to arm the anticommunist Afghan militia groups. Using Pakistan as their intermediary, the United States and its allies found themselves handing out weapons of every shape and size to a motley assortment of "freedom fighters." At least half of these groups was comprised of people known today as "Islamic jihadists." They included in their number a wealthy Saudi by the name of Usama Bin Ladin, who began to emerge initially as a provider of funds and ultimately as a military leader.

Afghanistan was flooded with light weapons, and toward the end also with the lethal Stinger anti-aircraft missiles that brought down a fair number of Russian assault helicopters. The Najibullah government had hardly fallen in 1992, three years after the Russians withdrew, than the freedom fighters had already split and commenced a new civil war pitting the Taliban, with US and Pakistani support, against the Northern Alliance armed by Russia, Iran, and others.

The Taliban entered Kabul in 1996 and governed Afghanistan until shortly after 11 September 2011, when the United States (which had become an enemy in the meantime) invaded their country to punish them for offering Bin Laden their hospitality. But the weapons in the hands of the Taliban and of other groups fighting against the United States today are still largely those donated by the CIA 30 years ago. And the same is true of the guerrilla training, of the explosives, and of certain figures such as Golboddin Hekmatyar, a merciless anti-Soviet fighter in the past and a cruel anti-American butcher today. Even the Stinger missiles are still there, and I have even seen them in the hands of the drug traffickers who operate on the border with Iran.

Now that the United States is withdrawing, defeated, from Afghanistan, and that the specter of a Taliban takeover is once more looming on the horizon, the lesson to be learned is a bitter one. Outside intervention in a civil war or military occupation involving the arming of local militia groups never resolves anything, because it fails to achieve the desired objective while merely shifting the clash onto a different scale: bloodier, and trickier to tackle with the tools of diplomacy or of politics further down the line.

In Syria today, exactly as happened in Afghanistan three decades ago, we would be kidding ourselves if we thought that that the United States, Europe, or any other outside player is capable of controlling the ultimate fate of the weapons that it supplies. The opposition in Syria is even more disorganized and split than the Afghan Mojaheddin front was. Its militarily strongest groups are precisely the ones comprising Islamic fundamentalists, and so far they have distinguished themselves for a degree of cruelty and of scorn for civilians' security not much different from that of Al-Asad's troops.

Moreover, the clandestine operations for the supply of weapons to the Syrian rebels are not being conducted in the first person but via intermediaries. The role played by Pakistan in Afghanistan's case is being played today by the Saudis and by Qatar, two players who are unlikely to worry too much about making sure that the weapons do not fall into the hands of the more radical Islamists.

It should come as no surprise that, exactly as happened in Afghanistan, it is precisely the more extreme factions in Syria that are proving to be the most valiant and successful on the

battlefield. Thanks also to the West's option to put its money on a militarization of the clash, what began as a stage in the Arab Spring and as a peaceful process of political change has degenerated into a brutal civil war -- a war consisting of fierce clashes where the fiercest of the opposition groups naturally end up gaining the upper hand.

Arming the Syrian opposition against a relatively united and militarily strong regime that continues to enjoy the support of significant groups among the population, means drastically reducing the chances of a "soft landing" [previous two words in English in original] if and when Al-Asad falls. It means increasingly frightening those Syrians who support the regime only because they fear the continuation of violence on a wider scale. If Al-Asad falls, we would be foolish to expect the armed opposition to agree to demobilize. It will attempt to consolidate its position even at the cost of splitting and of setting in motion a new cycle of sectarian violence, and even at the cost of rebelling against its sponsors -- which, as we were saying, is exactly what happened in Afghanistan.

Source: L'Unita, Rome, in Italian 5 Nov 12