

DIPLOMATIC PROSPECTS AFTER THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY'S ANNUAL DEBATE

*By André BURSTIN
ESISC Research Associate*

The General Debate of the United Nations' General Assembly 67th session has taken place in New York from Tuesday September 25 to Monday October 1. During this week, the world leaders followed one another at the chair to express their nations' views on the major issues on the global diplomatic agenda, including the Iranian nuclear program, the Malian crisis and the widespread terrorist risk in western Africa and the deterioration of the situation in Syria.

On these subjects, it seemed necessary to review the stands taken by the main international actors and to assess the prospects for concrete actions on the ground after the end of the debates in New York.

Show of firmness on Iran nuclear program

One of the most dramatic moments of the session was the intervention of Benjamin Netanyahu, who drew a red line on a chart representing a cartoon-like atomic bomb, arguing that Iran would be able to produce such a device by the summer of 2013. In what could remain in the memory of the General Assembly along with Nikita Khrushchev's shoe and Fidel Castro's chickens in the 1960s, the Israeli Prime minister warned the world of the danger of a nuclear Iran, urging the international community not to take such a risk. However, one has to note that Benjamin Netanyahu has not threatened openly to use the military force, although no major steps toward a solution of the issue was achieved in New York.

Over the past months, Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly exhorted the United States to fix a clear red line to halt Iran's *uranium enrichment* process. As we have already stressed out in a previous briefing (Large-scale international deployment of military forces off Iran – 21/09/2012), this demand has been a source of tensions between Israel and the United States. Benjamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama had failed to meet each other before the opening of the General Assembly's session, and even the Israeli press expressed concerns over the apparent involvement of the Prime minister in the U.S. presidential campaign in favor of the republican candidate.

Following the conclusion of the debate, it must however be noted that both Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu left New York with some reasons for contentment and some guarantees. In his own address to the General Assembly, the U.S. President indeed warned that the diplomatic time was not "unlimited", whereas he got assurances that no Israeli strike against Iran nuclear facilities would take place before Election Day on November 6.

France attempts to focus attention on the Sahel crisis

On the second day of the debate, French president attempted to focus the World attention on the crisis in Sahel. François Hollande highlighted the unacceptable risk created by the occupation of northern Mali by terrorist groups – Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Movement for *Unicity and Jihad* in Western Africa (MUJWA) and Ansar Dine. He also commended the determination of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and declared its support to any initiative aimed at ending the conflict in North of Mali and restoring the territorial integrity of the country. It has to be noted that in the meantime, the Ecowas has agreed on a military deployment plan and has submitted a request for assistance in this regard to the U.N. Security Council.

“There is an urgency to act to end the suffering of the people of Mali and to prevent a similar situation that would be even more complicated in the Sahel and the rest of the world” added Malian Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra during a special session held later in the week. However, these emergency calls have been faced with deep divisions among the international community. The United States stressed on the absolute need for a legitimate government in Bamako. Moreover, many diplomats in New York expressed serious doubts about the regarding strategy drew by the Ecowas and its ability to afford the costs of such military deployment.

No solution to political deadlock over Syria

While the General Assembly Hall *was listening to numerous speeches* on the necessity to “settle international disputes or situations by peaceful means” – which was the official theme of this year debate – the bloodshed continued in Syria. Despite countless debates and private meetings between major diplomatic actors, it has to be admitted that the Syrian crisis can be regarded as the main failure of this year’s session of the General Assembly.

All Western countries urged the United Nations to provide assistance to the Syrian people and repeated their warnings to the Assad regime. Nevertheless, neither Russia nor China has distanced itself from the opposition against any international intervention, despite a new proposal made by the Emir of Qatar. Meanwhile, the Syrian regime had the opportunity to denounce the “conspiracy” of the Americans, the Europeans and the Arab countries “financing terrorism.”

Demonstration of the need of a deep reform

This incapacity to achieve any substantive progress in Syria is emblematic of the deep deadlock in the functioning of United Nations. On the three issues we have highlighted in this briefing, the only potential solutions are discussed outside the U.N. arena.

The risk of an imminent Israeli air strike against Iran seems to be moving further due to the U.S. presidential election, but new diplomatic failures in the coming months would lead to a major security crisis in the Middle East. Whereas they expressed skepticism about the Ecowas plans, the United States are now considering carrying out an extended drone war against local terrorist groups. Finally, with regard to Syria, the sheer impossibility to get an international agreement is raising concern that the crisis will not end without a new accumulation of bloodsheds.

In this happens, the United Nations would have demonstrated once more that they are not able to function anymore without a thorough reform. Almost 20 years after the Rwandese Genocide and the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia, the organization might not be able afford another failure of this scale in this new decade.