

The Syrian Conflict – A Long Term Civil War?

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A comment by:

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With the Syrian crisis officially entering its fourth year, let it be asserted that the military solution to the ongoing war is no longer an option.

Historically since March 2011, Syria's unres- traint war can be divided into three major battles: The "Battle of Hums" (Baba Amru) in November 2011 which represented the risk of dividing Syria. The battle happened directly after China and Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution on Syria on October 4, 2011.

The second phase was the Damascus battle on July 18, 2012, which represented the risk of breaking down the Syrian army after the explosion of the regime's high-ranking officials administrating the crisis, better known as the "crisis cell". The third phase was the Aleppo battle which represented the emergence of a regional threat from Turkey's side.

The end of the military option led to a dif- ferent style of war inside Syria. From a po- litical perspective, the Syrian opposition has proved to be too weak: It has no power on the ground and the changed status of the regime due to its promotion of the conflict as an integral part of the global war on terrorism further weakens its position. Many factors can be viewed as positive elements helping the Syrian regime today:

- 1- The Saudi-Qatari conflict inside Syria which leads to a power shift, weakening in turn many of the Turkish- and Qatari-backed Salafist groups fighting in Syria.
- 2- The invention of Al Jama al Islamia that seems to be have close rela- tions with Saudi Arabia to end up being labeled as "terrorist group" by the Gulf's largest monarchy.
- 3- The changing position of Turkey that helped supporting the north- ern borders of Syria, besides the harsh war against terrorism from the Iraqi side that saved the area of Al Jazira¹.
- 4- The strategic intervention of Hez- bollah (Qusair battle) that followed Mikhail Bogdanov's visit to Lebanon on April 28, 2013.
- 5- The expansion of terrorism in the region and the arrival of many for- eign, also western, terrorists in Syria.

The current military situation, following the track from Qusair to Qalmoun then Yabroud, shows that on the ground, no strategic po- sitions are left for the Syrian regime. Logi- cally, the regime will not put an end to the problem, but will strategically push the coming battles towards the borders with neighboring countries, especially Jordan, as the southern part of Syria "Daraa" might be the last decisive battle in the South.

During Geneva II, the Syrian regime proved to have control over the land which, in a

¹ Upper Mesopotamia is the name used for the uplands and great outwash plain of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria and southeastern Turkey which is known by the traditional Arabic name of Al-Jazira (Arabic, الجزيرة)

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way, pushed the Americans not to accelerate the settlement of the crisis. Directly after the second round of Geneva II, both, the British envoy to the Syrian opposition John Wilkes and the US Secretary of State John Kerry, explained that their only concern is that Assad plays no role in the future of Syria.

Regionally, it seems that the political solution of the Syrian conflict started to cross with the settlement of the regional Palestinian-Israeli one. Hezbollah was considered one of the major obstacles hindering the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But having it today faced by one of the most dangerous security crisis, Hezbollah would be considered important to weaken its anti-settlement position. The same goes for the Syrian regime. Both Americans and Israelis believe that there is no settlement taming both the Syrian regime and Hezbollah; therefore, it is expected to witness a scenario of conflict that includes those two. The recent Israeli behavior can be seen as if Jerusalem is knocking on the door of Geneva. Therefore, it is probable that the coming Geneva conference on Syria will not deal merely with the Syrian issue but with regional settlement.

A comment by:

H.E. Bassam Haddadin

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The conflict in Syria enters its fourth year without a political or military solution on the horizon. The Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, is still gripping firmly on the central authority and seeking to expand his military control, supported by a cohesive army as well as the forces of Hezbollah and some Iraqi factions. On the opposite side, the influence of jihadist groups is growing among the military opposition; an opposition that is witnessing a state of divisions and the absence of a unified military administration. At

the same time, the regime of al-Assad enjoys unlimited political and military support from Russia and Iran versus an absence of a clear strategy by international parties.

With the killing of more than 140.000 people and the displacement of millions, President al-Assad seems not to retreat from the policy of the 'scorched earth' in the face of his opponents. It appears also that the armed opposition, in particular the jihadist factions who are one way or another backed up by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, do not consider to step back. The failure of the Geneva II Conference showed that – in light of the current facts and the persisting attitudes of the actors – the conflict in Syria is politically highly difficult to end.

Thus, in the absence of a decisive military and diplomatic solution, the Syrian crisis will not be resolved in the foreseeable future. The fighting will remain as long as the parties involved in the conflict are convinced of a potential military takeover – which looks very far from being achieved – and without the intervention of actors on the Northern or Southern fronts – a possible development considering the situation on the ground.

The dropping of the West's demand for al-Assad's resignation as a condition for dialogue and its backing away from military intervention boosted the conviction of al-Assad's regime that a rush towards a military solution and the gains on the ground will make the fall of al-Assad impossible. As a result, Damascus began talks about al-Assad's nomination for the upcoming presidential elections, based on the will of voters.

The outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and the sharp division between Russia and the West on the future of the Crimean peninsula will push Russia to be more rigorous towards the West in the Syrian case, a development that dispels hopes for a close political breakthrough, or even an increase of pressure on al-Assad and his regime to ease the violence and brutality of the massacres.

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In return, the West, which neither wants al-Assad nor the jihadists, left the conflict in the hands of the region's countries that are engaged in an open war on the Syrian ground. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar showed stubbornness and determination to engage in the military conflict until the departure of al-Assad, subsequently, driving Russia and Iran to hold on to al-Assad as a present and future symbol of the system and to reject any other possible solution.

Consequently, the continuation of the bloody military conflict in Syria and the absence of a political solution will ignite other conflicts in countries that incubate the fighting parties. The conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon will continue and be nourished by the parties fighting on the ground in Syria.

Jordan, which has so far maintained protecting itself from sparks and withstood the pressure of being drawn into direct conflict, seems likely to be affected anytime soon, especially with regard to the return of jihadists who went or prepare themselves to fight in Syria. The conflict between the Jordanian state and the jihadists passes through a critical stage that could lead to forms of 'chaos' in the future. It is not known to what extent the Jordanian jihadists would support the increasing pressure and harassment that the state imposes on the infiltrators or those who wish to return from the battlefields.

The fighting in Syria and the breadth of its circle will last for many years with the Syrian people having to pay for the proxy war continuing on the ground.

A comment by:

H.E. Dr. Nabil Al Sharif

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Two new developments may have a direct impact on the course of events in Syria: The

first is the visit of President Barak Obama to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and his meeting with King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. It is well known that US – Saudi relations have undergone, in recent months, a great deal of tension due to the rapprochement between the United States of America and Iran after the election of the reformist President Rouhani in Iran.

In fact, Saudi Arabia did not hide its anger about the US - Iranian rapprochement as it realizes that the changing relation will encourage Iran to accelerate its regional self projection, complete its intervention in Iraq and Syria and, additionally threaten the Gulf States. The US – Saudi dispute deepened when America failed to spearhead a military strike against the Syrian regime after using internationally banned chemical weapons against its citizens a few months ago. Saudi Arabia at the same time has never hidden its support to the revolution in Syria since the beginning and supplying the opposition with money and weapons.

The US president who has been keen to end the disagreement with Saudi Arabia visited Riyadh lately to meet the Saudi King. It is likely that Saudi Arabia has convinced the U.S. administration of the need to create a balance of power aimed at improving the situation of the opposition for future negotiations with the regime.

It should be noted that Obama's visit came also after the "defeat" of the West in the Ukraine, and the sense of humiliation of Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula despite the Western threats, which led Russia win a lot of supporters its courageous attitude towards the West. In this context, it could be asked if the West and, in particular, the United States are searching for a victory in Syria, at any price, to compensate for their loss in Ukraine? And is America going to follow the Saudi sugges-

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tions which call for the necessity of arming the opposition?

The second factor that will have a direct impact on the course of events in Syria is the winning of the Justice and Development Party, led by the powerful Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan in the Turkish municipal elections. Different projections indicated two possibilities in these elections: the first suggested the defeat of the party after being widely exposed to corruption allegations in the last months; the second assumed its drop to the last ranks among the winners. The party's victory, whose results exceeded the previous elections, surprised the observers and upended a lot of the previous assumptions. It is expected that after its decisive winning, the AKP will boost the Syrian revolution, especially as some of his opponents have tried to turn Turkish public opinion against the party's support of the Syrian revolution. The party could stress that the persisting strength of public support of the Turkish people in these elections reflects a widely shared approval for the party's positions, including its intervention in favor of the Syrian rebels.

There has already been a striking field development in recent days represented in the control of the opposition forces on the coastal areas adjacent to the city of Latakia, a main stronghold of the Alawites which will significantly help rebels to gain control over Damascus. The fast developments have surprised the regime and its supporters. Therefore, it should be asked if this will be a turning point in the course of the war? And does this mean that the war in Syria will soon end in favor of the opposition?

Whoever holds this view is unaware of the real situation on the ground, and not familiar with the complexity of the scene. It is no longer about oppressed people that want to get rid of an unjust regime, instead the conflict became international in every sense.

Syria is an Arab country whose economy is governed and controlled by an Alawite minority which imposes its rule on a marginalized and vulnerable Sunni majority. The Alawite belongs to the Shi'ite, a sect which encompasses the majority of Iran's population and members of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Therefore, it is likely that the militants of Hezbollah and Iran as well as Iraq's Shiites fight alongside the regime. In addition the regime has the unlimited Russian support because Moscow considers Syria as a strategic and irreplaceable vital need since it is Russia's only remaining ally in the Arab world and hence, the only gate for the Russian fleet .

The Sunni fighters compose several ideologies including moderate and extremist trends. After forming The Free Army from the defected Syrian Armed Forces personnel, the Syrian arena became an open space for all Sunni Islamic trends: Al-Nusra Front, Ahrar Al Sham, Soqour al Sham, Al-Furqan Brigade and the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Each fraction depends on the support of one side, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and possibly Al-Qaida.

In other words, the settlement of the situation in Syria will not occur with the fall of the regime because the agents and the opponents of the foreign powers are looking at the Syrian battle as part of global confrontation that goes beyond Bashar al-Assad's regime. Thus, despite the passing of 21 months of the war and the fall of about 50.000 civilians, the situation in Syria is still open to all possibilities.

If the new developments such as Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia and the escalating support of the Freedom and Justice Party could lead to a weakening of the regime, the war, however, will continue for years to come because its sectarian and regional dimensions have other considerations that exceed the fall or the survival of the regime.