



COMMENTARIES

The Mayhem in Syria: Where to?

AZZAM TAMIMI

**Geopolitical Realignments around Syria:
Threats and Opportunities**

AMMAR KAHF

**The Syrian Political Opposition: What Went
Wrong?**

UFUK ULUTAŞ

**The Multiple Faces of Jabhat al-Nusra/
Jabhat Fath al-Sham in Syria's Civil War**

CHRISTOPHER ANZALONE

**Post-Nuclear Deal Iran: Back to the Fold of
Imperialism?**

MOHAMMED NURUZZAMAN

The Mayhem in Syria: Where to?

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ABSTRACT *What started as a peaceful protest in the spring of 2011 soon developed into one of the most vicious and internationalized conflicts of modern times. The Syrian people's quest for freedom has proven to be so costly that nearly an entire population is today homeless and entire cities are in total ruin. No longer localized, this conflict has attracted the intervention of groups and countries from across the region and around the world. Yet, the Syrian people seem no less resolved to pursue the objectives for which they rose 5 years ago.*

The Roots of Revolution

Perhaps few Syrians were unimpressed by the dynamic that took off in Tunisia in late 2010 and soon afterwards in Egypt in early 2011. Just like the rest of the oppressed and humiliated 'subjects' of the Arab world, Syrians, too, aspired for emancipation and dreamed of a new dawn. What is certain, however, is that few of them expected their country to end up in ruins a few years later.

The Syrian revolution was sparked by the extreme brutality shown by local regime authorities in response to the actions of few pupils in the southern border city of Daraa. The

daring gesture of the pupils did not exceed writing anti-regime slogans on some walls, in imitation of what the *Aljazeera* and *Alhiwar* TV channels had shown revolutionaries doing in Tunisia and Egypt. Provoked by the repressive measures taken against the pupils, but also surely inspired by the ongoing Arab uprisings, Syrians took to the streets in what developed into peaceful mass protests in almost every town and city across the whole country.

The Assad regime responded to the protesters with the most brutal repressive measures. Despite the cruelty inflicted indiscriminately upon the Syrian people by Assad's security and

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military forces, the dynamic remained mostly peaceful for about six months. Throughout that period, from the beginning of the Spring of 2011 to the start of autumn, regime tactics included crying wolf. Both at the regional as well as the international level, Assad claimed that extremists from Al-Qaeda and its likes were infiltrating the country from abroad and waging war with the aim of replacing Syria's peaceful, pluralist and multi-religious state with a strict Islamic Shari'ah rule that threatened the very existence of religious minorities.

The regime's tactics also included provoking the people into carrying arms to defend themselves, their loved ones and their properties and livelihoods, in the face of a most atrocious campaign waged against them by the government. There were multiple stories about caches of arms being dis-

covered in some neighborhoods. It was as if the regime was desperately trying to convince the people to carry arms and fight back in order for its own narrative to be proven right: that the country was under attack and that the regime was justified in resorting to all the repressive measures it was engaging in.

Despite all of this, up until the fall of 2011 the dynamic remained peaceful and attracted world sympathy. Many European countries were vocal in condemning the Assad regime and in expressing solidarity with the rising masses. This is not to deny that at least some Syrians did call for taking up arms to fight back against regime forces and the thugs they employed, and to punish the perpetrators for some of the most heinous crimes, including murder, torture and rape. But those voices remained marginal and

ineffective until NATO intervened in favor of the Libyan revolutionaries

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who had risen against Gadhafi in the spring of that same year. Despite initial American hesitation, NATO air strikes were ordered to frustrate the regime's endeavor to brutally quell the revolution. Foreign intervention was key to preventing Gaddafi troops from perpetrating a massacre in the east Libyan city of Benghazi.

The events in Libya injected the leaders and spokespersons of the Syrian revolution both inside and outside the country with a huge dose of excitement. Many of them believed that NATO would soon intervene in Syria, as it had in Libya, in favor of the revolution and that this would be the end of the Syrian people's tribulation and the beginning of their new dawn.

In the meantime, Arab and Muslim fighters started making the journey to Syria to join the revolution. Saudi Arabia, for instance, was accused by

the Americans of releasing hundreds of suspected al-Qaeda members or sympathizers and of facilitating their departure for Syria. This might have been an attempt by the Saudis to export a headache abroad.

There has also been some controversy regarding the decision by the Assad regime in 2011 to release hundreds of political prisoners from prisons like Sadnaya. According to different reports, some or all of those released were radicals who soon joined jihadist groups or formed their own movements. Some observers believe that Assad did this on purpose while others maintain that at the time the regime did not really know what it was doing.¹

The fall of Tripoli on 22 August 2011 and the capture and immediate lynching of Gaddafi two months later raised hopes in Syria and convinced more and more people that militarization, hitherto discouraged, was the only way forward. That proved to be a grave mistake and a gross miscalculation. The international community had a completely different reckoning. Despite occasional warnings by U.S. and European leaders that Assad had to go, regime change in Syria was off the table. Too much was at stake in the region, and therefore any comparison with Libya was ill-conceived.

International Stakes

As far as the United States and its European allies were concerned, Is-

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rael's security was always of prime importance and any change in Syria had to be measured against this concern. Despite a history of hostility between the Syrian regime and Israel, the borders between the two sides had remained calm and free from any significant hostile activity since the last major war between the two countries in 1973. Even during Israel's wars with Lebanon or with Gaza, and in spite of the Syrian support –and even sponsorship– of Hezbollah in Lebanon and some of the Palestinian resistance factions inside Gaza, no action was ever allowed across the Syrian borders with the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. It would make sense, then, that any regime change in Damascus would have to be carefully considered lest it disturb the ongoing calm.

Another important consideration for the Western powers was the rise of the Islamic State and its success in controlling large swaths of land inside Iraq and neighboring Syria. The need to fight this menace, some circles in the West insisted, had precedence over playing any effective role

in empowering the Syrian revolution in its bid to oust Assad from power. The Islamic State was, and continues to be seen as a much greater threat to U.S. and European interests and to the interests of their allies in the region than the Assad regime, which in fact seemed to have by then consolidated its role as a *de facto* ally in the American-led war against terrorism.

Despite the apparent unfriendliness between the two sides, the Americans and their British allies had previously relied on the Assad regime for assistance in some covert anti-terrorism operations. In the aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan post 9/11, Syria was one of the most common destinations for 'rendering' suspects, along with Egypt and Jordan. One Syrian prison facility contained individual cells that were roughly the size of coffins. Detainees were tortured by Syrian interrogators acting on behalf of American and British intelligence officers. Torture was said to involve a chair frame used to stretch the spine (the "German chair") and beatings.²

Subsequent events, especially the failure of the West to act on its threat to hit back if chemical weapons were used in Syria, proved that Assad had succeeded in selling himself to the Americans and the Europeans as a key partner in the war against extremism. The twin Damascus bombings on December 2011 was used well by the regime to this end. Accusing Jabhat al-Nusra of perpetrating the atrocity, the regime started to use "us versus radicals" card as an international public diplomacy stunt.

Not only did the regime get away with its war crimes and crimes against humanity, it secured a safe seat on every subsequent discussion of the future of the country. The revolutionary Islamic groups fighting the regime in Syria ended up being designated, together with ISIS, as the real enemy, and the danger threatening both Israel and the status quo across the region. This had become especially so following the initial failure of the US and its allies in Europe and in the region to create, arm and train pro-Western, secular-minded anti-Assad factions whose mission would have been to pull the rug from underneath the feet of Islamic fighters.

Nothing could have been more satisfying to the Iranians and the Russians than the change of heart in the Western capitals. The Iranian and the Russians had –each for its own reasons– been willing to send men and machines to Syria in order to prevent the fall of their ally in Damascus. The war on terrorism provided them with the best cover.

The Russians see the regime in Syria as their last remaining ally in the Middle East; it has traditionally allowed them to have bases in ports overlooking the Mediterranean, whose warm waters the Russians have always longed to have access to. Undoubtedly, as often happens in international politics, the Syrian conflict presented the Russians with a golden opportunity to secure a permanent seat around the negotiations table and to use Syria to twist arms and extract

concessions from the West on other unrelated issues.

Iran's involvement has its own logic. Since the early days that followed the success of the Iranian revolution in the late seventies, the Iranians have invested heavily in forging a powerful and enduring alliance with the Assad ruling family in Syria, an alliance without which Iran might never have been able to enjoy the influence it has today in Lebanon. It would be hard to imagine that Hezbollah could have come into existence in the first place without the political and logistical support the regime in Damascus provided the Iranians and their Lebanese lackey for more than three decades.

To many people in the Middle East, the Iranian interest in Syria might seem sectarian. In fact, this is how it has been generally perceived in many parts of the Muslim World. Yet, sectarianism is nothing but a tool, which both sides use –as religion or ideology are often used or abused– in order to motivate supporters and sympathizers or to justify and defend policy. Indeed, the Iranians have been recruiting volunteers from within Iran itself, from Iraq, from Yemen and from various parts of the Indian continent and Afghanistan to join the fight in Syria, ostensibly in defense of Shiite holy shrines that are said to be threatened with destruction or sacrilege by Sunni zealots.

However, Iran's real motivation has been to expand its influence as a rising regional superpower and to check and hinder the emergence within the

A picture shows on March 31, 2016 the remains of Temple of Bel's "Cella", which was blown up by jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) group in August 2015, in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra.

AFP PHOTO / JOSEPH EID



region of any meaningful Sunni power. Iran's real foes in the region are not autocracies such as those of the decadent ruling families of the Gulf and Arabia, despite all claims to Sunni Islam or to Wahhabism. What the Iranians truly fear is the emergence of a Sunni democratic order that might expose and even scandalize the theocratic and inherently tyrannical nature of the Iranian regime.

In addition to the usual political and economic ambitions of an aspiring superpower, Iran was particularly worried that the model it had been trying to sell to the Muslims around the world would be exposed as lacking and failing. Iran was also worried that over the past decade or so, Turkey, which under the current administration has adopted a policy of opening up to the region and to the Muslim World at large, has been making in-

roads into the region and beyond and is proving to be a formidable competitor. Furthermore, Turkey's model of governance seemed to be leaving a good impression on many, at a time when Iran's perceived sectarian policies were losing ground and sympathy in majority Sunni countries.

Through all of this, Iran's principle source of anxiety has been the Arab 'Sunni' revolutions that erupted in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread at a lightning speed in early 2011 to Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya.

Right from the start, and despite some lip service, Iran was never pleased about the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It even took the side of some of their staunch opponents, including the Nasserists. The 3 July military coup, which brought an end not only to the rule of the Muslim Broth-

erhood but also to the process of democratization in Egypt, is said to have been a source of relief for the Iranians.

The counterrevolution in Egypt was, of course, not the making of the Iranians but ironically of their adversaries in the Gulf: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who were similarly horrified at the prospect of the success of democratization in Egypt and elsewhere in the neighborhood. Billions of dollars were dedicated by the Gulf Arabs to the conspiracy to topple the democratic government and reinstall military rule. Perhaps it never occurred to the financiers and planners that such a counterrevolution would reap additional fruits for Iran and its allies in Iraq, in Syria and even in Yemen.

Egypt's democratically elected President Muhammad Morsi was a strong sympathizer with the Syrian people in their struggle against the tyranny of the Assad regime. Despite lacking in authority, he would have done what he could in order to translate that sympathy into real support. To start with, he opened Egypt to Syrians who were fleeing persecution and ordered that they be treated like citizens. The military junta immediately expressed solidarity with the Assad regime and started cracking down on Syrians living in Egypt. This, at least partly, explains the exodus of Syrians from Egypt and the growing number of them risking their lives to reach the shores of Europe using smuggler networks operating via Libya. Far fewer Syrians would have contemplated migrating to Europe had

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Egypt remained a welcoming and hospitable country. Whereas the government of Dr. Muhammad Morsi sought to accommodate the Syrians and enable them to start anew after losing it all back home, the military junta used the local media to launch a xenophobic campaign against Syrians, driving them into the hands of human traffickers some of whom were reported to be linked to the Egyptian authorities.³

The impact of the killing of democracy in Egypt was soon felt everywhere in the region, including within Iraq and Syria. Iraq's pro-Iran Prime Minister Maliki acquired motivation from what had occurred in Egypt to consolidate his tyrannical rule. He employed brutal force to crush the uprising of the Sunni Arabs of Anbar that had been peaceful for one whole year since its eruption in December 2012.

These were the same Arab tribes whose sons had been recruited to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq through what was known as the *Sahawat* (the awakenings). But having completed

What really matters in the long run, is not what these players wish, but what the Syrian people desire and are willing to struggle for

their mission and almost eradicated al-Qaeda from Iraq's Sunni towns and cities, the Sahawat fighters were let down by both the Americans, who had recruited them and used them in their own 'war against terrorism,' and by the Iraqi Shiite-dominated government that reaped the benefits of their war on al-Qaeda.

The bloody suppression of the peaceful uprising was the one event that changed the mood among the Sunni Arabs almost 180 degrees. What al-Maliki did was the greatest gift the remnants of al-Qaeda and of the Iraqi Ba'th Party could have hoped for. This was the point at which they forged their own alliance, creating what become known as the ISIS.

The military coup in Egypt and the crushing of the Arab Sunni uprising in Iraq combined to boost two opposites: the Syrian regime in Damascus and ISIS across Iraq and Syria. Seen from a global perspective, the fight in Syria was no longer perceived as a conflict between a people seeking freedom from tyranny and a lousy dictatorship but a fight against terrorism. This was a dream come true for Bashar al-Assad, who could from then on rely for the protection of his

existence not only on Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and a score of Shiite militias, but on the entire U.S.-led international community.

Where to Now?

Now, where is Syria heading in this ocean of chaos and mayhem? For the time being it would seem that the war of attrition among the various parties involved is set to continue and the country is heading toward more destruction.

The regional parties involved directly in the Syrian war, primarily Iran and Hezbollah, seem resolved, at least thus far, to fight it out to the end. "The end," from their point of view, means one thing, namely the survival of the Assad regime and the eradication of what they consider to be the *takfiri* (pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (kafir) and no longer Muslim⁴) threat not only to the regime in Damascus but to the entire region. In a speech delivered on the evening of Friday 24 June 2016, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who is believed to be implementing an Iranian official policy, did not hesitate to declare that his troops fighting the jihadists in the Aleppo region would continue the fight because they were defending not only Syria but Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan.⁵

Yet Nasrallah's disclosure of the number of recent fatalities in the battle for Aleppo was interpreted by some observers as an attempt to defuse an evolving tension within his own

Lebanese Shiite community due to the recent increase in the number of casualties among his men fighting in Syria and even in Iraq. So, the end for Nasrallah and his Iranian pay masters may come at a much higher price than they expect, and a completely different form from what they wish.

As for the Russians, Syria is turning into some kind of migraine. In recent days, Russian top brass has expressed concern that things are not going according to plan.⁶⁵ The question that begs an answer is, how long will Russia be able to maintain its combative role – that seems to yield very little in terms of tilting the balance decisively in favor of its ally in Damascus.

The other regional players, Turkey and the Arab Gulf states, seem unable to play a significant role in effecting any major shift in the conflict. Turkey is increasingly more preoccupied with its Kurdish problem, while Saudi Arabia has been sidetracked completely by its own Yemeni problem.

What is certain, however –and despite whatever regional or international powers desire or fear– is that few Syrians are prepared to accept the continuation of the Assad regime. I had the opportunity of touring a number of refugee camps in Jordan and Turkey where I had one-on-one conversations with quite a few Syrian refugees. The question was always: under what circumstances would you be willing to return home? What everyone I spoke to wanted was the removal, even the prosecution, of Assad and his men. The Russians, the

Iranians, Hezbollah, Europe, America and the rest of the world may not deem it useful to do away with the Assad regime at this time. What really matters in the long run, however, is not what these players wish, but what the Syrian people desire and are willing to struggle for. As one Syrian in a Jordanian refugee camp said to me, ‘what else remains for us to lose? If we do not return to a free Syria, there is nothing to return to.’ ■

Endnotes

1. See: *The Guardian*, “Four Jihadists, One Prison: All Released by Assad and All Now Dead,” May 11, 2016, retrieved from <http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/isis-jihad-syria-assad-islamic/>; Siegel, “From Jail to Jihad: Former Prisoners Fight in Syrian Insurgency,” October 10, 2013, retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/former-prisoners-fight-in-syrian-insurgency-a-927158.html>.
2. See: Open Society Foundation, “20 Extraordinary Facts about CIA Extraordinary Rendition and Secret Detention,” February 5, 2013, retrieved from <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/20-extraordinary-facts-about-cia-extraordinary-rendition-and-secret-detention>.
3. For a glimpse of what was going on and the Egyptian role in this see: *Huff Post*, “Sisi’s Egypt Pushes Migrants Into the Sea,” April 26, 2015, retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/sisis-egypt-pushes-migran_b_7147706.html.
4. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, retrieved from <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2319>.
5. A summary of his remarks is given in this report: *The News*, “Fight for Aleppo ‘Greatest Battle’ in Syria, says Hassan Nasrallah,” June 25, 2016, retrieved from <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/130482-Fight-for-Aleppo-greatest-battlein-Syria-says-Hassan-Nasrallah>.
6. See: Maxim A. Suchkov, *Al-Monitor*, “Are Major Players Shifting Strategies in Syria?,” June 23, 2016, retrieved from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/06/major-players-shift-strategies-syria-russia-iran.html>.

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