

## **EXTREMISTS AND CONQUERORS OF SYRIA'S WAR?**

مقاله ام در رابطه با ضرورت مداخله موثر و غیر مستقیم خارجی در سوریه. استدلال این نوشتار بر این محور متمرکز است که تغل در مداخله بشردوستانه هوشمندانه می تواند تنها یک برنده داشته باشد: بنیادگرایان

### **Extremists and conquerors of Syria's war?**

By: Ahmad Hashemi

After 11 months of conflict and despite recent progress made by the rebels, most parts of Syria are still under Assad's rule. It is true that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is gaining increasing recognition, and military and diplomatic strength, promising that a regime collapse is nearing, yet, for a plenty of reasons, neither party is able to radically change the current equation on the ground.

Although the rebels have been closing in on the outskirts of Aleppo and Damascus, the real battle for the capital city has barely begun, and the hard inner circle of the regime's power has yet to be fully engaged. To win the war, the rebels have to conquer the capital and remove Assad from power, and the battle for Damascus could take months of fierce street-to-street fighting before the rebels reach their final goal.

The European Union has almost recognized Syria's National Coalition, consisting of major opposition groups, as the "legitimate representative" of the Syrian people, and the US, excluding extremists such as al-Nusra Front, has done the same. Even Russia doesn't rule out the possibility of the rebels toppling Assad anymore. But all this doesn't necessarily mean the demise of Bashar Assad is imminent, smooth and easy.

As pressure on Assad mounts, the possibility of dramatic surprises can also clearly not be excluded. Pushed into a corner, Assad and his loyal army, mostly from the Alawite sect, could be convinced that, for the sake of their community, it is time to use their last option and resort to the use of WMDs, and this is why international intervention matters.

The world needs to financially and militarily support the moderate factions within the opposition, and the current lack of resolute determination to take action is horrendous because what is going on in the battlefield is simply a futile war of attrition, and if no foreign concrete assistance comes in favor of the opposition, it can't win the war.

Exploiting this stalemate, religious extremists would emerge as the sole winners of prolonged fighting, which has the potential to turn into an all-out civil war. Recent indications of al-Qaida linked al-Nusra extremists making progress and winning hearts and minds should be taken seriously by the region and the world.

DESPITE HAVING made some significant advances, the rebels lack the heavy weaponry required to launch an effective assault, and the current impasse fuels the growth of extremist factions and jihadi groups within the FSA, which are detrimental to regional stability and hostile to freedom and democracy. Therefore, while a direct ground invasion needs to be strictly avoided, a quick international intervention, coordinated with the FSA, consisting of an effective and massive air strike to destroy government infrastructure and disable Syria's war machine, is imperative.

### **Such and intervention will serve several purposes:**

1. To deter Assad's air force from using its partially ready WMDs against rebels and even civilians. Only an effective and crushing air strike targeting the Syrian air force can cripple its ability to act. According to several sources, the Syrian air force is one of the largest in the Middle East, composed of aircraft provided by Russia and missiles acquired from Iran and North Korea. The Syrian military – believed to having one of the largest arsenals of chemical weapons in the world – has loaded chemical weapons into bombs and is preparing for orders from President Bashar Assad to use them.
2. To thwart the ambitions of religious extremists such as al-Qaida affiliate al-Nusra to take advantage of the chaos created after the uprising to gain the upper hand by showing themselves to be the real warriors on the ground.
3. To reduce anti-Western pessimism, rife among the Syrian people and in the region as a whole, which escalated following the indifference displayed by the US and EU vis-à-vis the massacre of Syrian civilians.
4. To set up a role model for other democracy-thirsty nations in the Middle East, with Iran in the lead. This support will, in particular, encourage Iranians to take to the streets and boost their morale to defy despotism and tyranny and claim their democratic and civil rights, dealing a blow to the ayatollah's regime and its nuclear ambitions.

Encouraged by North Korea's defiance of international warnings, the Islamic Republic is adamant about producing its Islamic nuclear bomb – a term borrowed from Mohsen Rezaee, Iran's former Revolutionary Guards Corps commander, who coined the phrase in a private meeting back in 2005 – in violation of its so-called IAEA obligations, as its negotiating team buys time in reaching out to the world.

5. Prevent al-Qaida-linked foreign extremists, mostly Sunni Arabs from Iraq, the Persian Gulf region and North Africa from taking part at the war. A recent report by the United Nations Human Rights Council clearly admits this influx has the potential to create a full-fledged sectarian conflict in Syria. Iraqi Shi'ite militias and Hezbollah of Lebanon, in coordination with their big brother, Iran, are increasingly engaging on behalf of Assad. According to various sources, Lebanese and Iraqi Shi'ites and Sunnis are already fighting a proxy war in Syria.

UNDOUBTEDLY, SYRIA's fate, and that of Bashar Assad should be decided through ballots, not bullets. Yet, fighting a 42-year-old dictatorship, the mainstream, moderate factions of the FSA need support, in the form of sophisticated anti-aircraft and anti-armor weaponry, to win the war. Otherwise, feeling abandoned by the world, the FSA will be forced to choose the only available alternative.

Although the Syrian people tend to practice a moderate form of Islam, living in peaceful coexistence within a framework of tolerance and relative freedom compared to other Arab nations in the region, there is no guarantee that they would not embrace radical Islam, if they have to, as a last resort. The extremists know very well how to exploit complicated and turbulent situations and display their lethal and inhumane ideology as a savior, as they did 34 years ago in Iran.

TO REDUCE the pro-Assad forces' resistance, hearts and minds must be won. Besides Syria's Christian minority, Alawites are the most educated and indeed, the most needed sector for reshaping and restructuring post-Assad Syria, and this sect needs to be ensured autonomy and guaranteed internationally-backed security, free from persecution and likely reprisals.

The world community should try to help Syria not to go from bad to worse by falling into hand of extremists, but rather, become a country like Libya – that is trying to observe democratic values – creating friendly ties with the West and Israel and practicing democracy.

Syria shouldn't become a failed country like Somalia or another fundamentalist state sponsor of terrorism such as the clerical thugocracy of Iran, both of which would be a nightmare for the region and a hotbed for further violence, extremism, instability and terrorism in the already violence-stricken Middle East.

WHILE THE wealthy, oil-rich Arab states have the capacity and willingness to assume the costs of this regime change, they should be warned to render only their military and financial support, not their destructive Salafi and Wahabi ideology.

Israel needs to remain completely neutral, as its engagement, in whatever form, would be controversial and do more harm than good, giving the Syrian regime a pretext to turn the battle into an Arab-Israeli issue with Bashar as the Arab champion.

The world community has to put more pressure on Iraq, and tightly control and monitor the eastern Mediterranean region. Also, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki needs to adopt a more collaborative approach in preventing the influx of weapons and jihadis into Syria. He needs to understand the importance of preventing Iran from using Iraqi territory as a transit route for Iranian weapons and IRGC members.

Turkey should be given a pivotal role, logistically and militarily, since its conservative leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan wishes to appear as another Caliph of the Muslim world in pursuit of his Neo-Ottoman policies by having a major role in removing his fierce enemy.

In addition, the Turkey-Syria border is the only practical route for any humanitarian intervention at least, because 1) Erdogan is ready to do whatever it takes to see a once-close ally, Bashar Assad, toppled and replaced with a likeminded Sunni-dominated conservative political structure, 2) northern Syria is mostly controlled by the FSA and 3) those areas are dominated by a Sunni population eager to establish a political structure laid upon ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood, 4) the An- Nusayriyah Mountains form a natural barrier running parallel to the coast between areas largely populated by Alawites who are ready to fight for their survival on the side of the regime, and the rest of Syria.

Therefore, the time has come to take appropriate action. Because with the continuation of the current settings, as the world watches this embarrassing tragedy, the radical jihadi groups are gradually outnumbering moderates among the rebels, suggesting a protracted and bloody struggle could well lie ahead, the final winner of which would be radicalism.

The influx of foreigners raises the risk of fighting spilling into neighboring countries riven by similar communal fault lines.

Only effective assistance to the moderate factions of the FSA rebels can reverse this gloomy process,

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