

An Ugly Stalemate - The Uprising in Syria

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Angered by the non-stop, one-sided propaganda on CNN and BBC World, usually a prelude to NATO bombing campaigns (including the six-month onslaught on Libya, the casualties of which are still hidden from the public) or direct occupations, I was asked to explain my views on RTV. I did so, denouncing the promotion of the Syrian National Council by western media networks and pointing out that some of the armed-struggle opposition were perfectly capable of carrying out their own massacres and blaming them on the regime.

There were doubts about Houla, which at that time there were. No longer. It's now clear that the regime was responsible. That in no way invalidates my general point, but has led to a lot of confusion regarding my views and worried and sometimes angry e-mails from Syrian friends and outright slander (accusations by frothing sectarians flaunting their ignorance of being an 'Assad apologist' just like pro-war idiots called us 'Saddam apologists' during the run up to the occupation of Iraq) from others.

How can a 6 minute TV interview be anything else but short and incomplete and given its context, too rhetorical to be of much weight. In fact it was little more than a response to the news of the last few days. So it might be worth make a few points clear so that critics have something to argue against.

From the very beginning, I have openly and publicly supported the popular uprising against the family-run Baathist outfit that rules Damascus. I have been opposed to this regime ever since the Assad military coup that toppled its much more enlightened predecessor whose leaders and activists I met after the Six-Day war and who numbered in their ranks some of the finest intellectuals of the Arab world. To be honest I did not imagine that Syria would erupt like Egypt, but was delighted when it happened. I hoped that the scale of the uprising, its evident popularity would force the regime into negotiations and a jointly agreed plan to elect an Assembly that would decide on a new Constitution. There is some evidence to suggest that few within the regime did favour such a course. Very few. It was not to be. Stupidity and brutality, the two principal characteristics of the regime, could not be swept aside. They were institutionalised and Bashar Assad was convinced that any concessions would be fatal. For many months the popular uprising was peaceful and its strength grew and grew, not unlike the first Palestinian intifada against their Israeli overlords. My views were clear: Total solidarity with the people. Down with the dictatorship. This remains my position. There is nothing even vaguely progressive about this regime. But who will overthrow it and how? Not an unimportant question.

In Egypt the mass movement conquered all because the military leaders had decided that they could no longer back Mubarak and there were fears that soldiers and junior officers might not obey orders. Major cities had seen the masses chasing away the security apparatuses of the falling regime. Once the US withdrew its support for the dictator, it was only a matter of time.

In Syria during the first period, the military high command held firm, built as it is on sectarian lines. Despite this there were some defections to the side of the people. Once state repression was unleashed on a national some within the country decided that the peaceful nature of the struggle was no longer sufficient the military and civilians close to the Western intelligence agencies were

pulled out just like in Libya.

The West began to prepare its government-in-exile, using Turkey as its principle relay and Saudi Arabia and Qatar as subsidiaries. The opportunity to weaken the Iranians was too good to be resisted and as a special bonus, Hizballah the only force in the Arab world to have politically defeated Israel twice in the region would be gravely weakened. [Though here one could argue that if a new census--- the last was in 1936--- was demanded it would change the political map of Lebanon overnight. But in the interests of 'democracy' the 'international community' will not allow a genuine democracy to work on this coastal strip that they tore apart from Syria to maintain an imperial presence.]

Opposing Assad should not lead to backing a Western intervention and an imposed regime on the Libyan model with a quick-fix election as a PR fig-leaf. And yet many important voices within the opposition at home feel that an intervention is now the only answer. "Where is the 'international community'?" they ask in plaintive tones. Others remain staunchly opposed to a Western intervention. The exact balance of forces inside the country is not easy to judge from the outside and a mass movement with a common goal necessarily requires that difference amongst themselves are not highlighted.

But, as in Egypt, once the euphoria of the uprising and its success in getting rid of a hated despot evaporates, politics emerge. What is the strongest political force in Syrian politics today? Who would be the largest party in parliament when free elections take place? Probably the Muslim Brothers and in that case the experience will be educative since neo-liberalism and the US alliance are the cornerstone of the Turkish model that Morsi and other colleagues in the region seek to emulate. For half of the last century, Arab nationalists, socialists, communists and others were locked in a battle with the Muslim Brothers for hegemony in the Arab world. We may not like it (and I certainly don't), but that battle has been won by the Brotherhood. Their future will depend on their ability to deliver social change. The Egyptian and Syrian working class have played a huge part in both uprisings. Will they tolerate neo-liberal secularism or Islamism for too long? The Palestinians who demonstrate for social justice against the PLO puppet regime and are beaten by uniformed security thugs of the PLO and the IDF are a sign that the turbulence might not be easily contained.

A NATO intervention would install a semi-puppet government. As I argued in the case of Libya once NATO entered the fray: whoever wins the people will lose. It would be the same in Syria. On this I am in total accord with the statement of the Syrian Local Coordinating Committees published on 29 August 2011.

What will happen if the present situation continues? An ugly stalemate. The model that comes to mind is Algeria after the military, backed strongly by France and its Western allies, intervened to stop the second round of an election in which the FIS were going to win. This resulted in an attritional civil war with mass atrocities carried out by both sides while the masses retreated to an embittered passivity.

This is why I continue to insist that even at this late stage a negotiated solution is the best possible way to get rid of Assad and his henchmen. Pressure from Teheran, Moscow and Beijing might help achieve this sooner than the military posturing of Sultan Erdogan, his Saudi allies and their surrogates in Syria.

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P.S.

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