



A Heretic's Up-Dated Musings on Syria

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April 2012

Executive Summary

The intense fighting since early 2012 coupled with the vastly improved manipulation of the Jihadists by Iranian intelligence have already enabled the Assad administration to take control over the war in Syria. This means that Damascus once again effectively controls the strategic narrative – but not each region, let alone each incident. Hence, barring a major foreign intervention the Assad administration should be considered over the hump, even though the predominantly Sunni insurrection could continue for months or even years to come. Presently, the primary explosive threat of the Syrian conflict is the growing dichotomy between the situation inside Syria and the relentless efforts by a myriad of external forces to exploit the conflict in pursuit of their regional and global interests.

The traditional key to ruling Syria is an alliance between the security and economic elites. Assad's Damascus has effectively restored the alliance between these foci of power. The Syrian armed forces have consolidated control over the economic-strategic Damascus–Aleppo belt. Moreover, the growing threat of Jihadist terrorism has left the urban-economic elite little choice but to cast their lot with the Assad administration. The only impediment is the lingering insurrection in Homs and Hama which the Annan cease-fire might help contain. The growing threats of foreign intervention is pushing Damascus to complete the pacification – albeit while markedly raising the level of violence and the ruthlessness of the crackdown.

The Assad administration is winning at the national strategic level and there is nothing any opposition entity can presently do to reverse this trend. Consequently, the traditional Sunni population – their tribal and extended family leaders – is gravitating toward the Syrian Liberation Army – a loose coalition of like-minded localized forces and mini-groups. Hence, Damascus cannot ignore the SLA's ascent because the government will ultimately have to demonstrate the cessation of armed opposition and establish control over the interior. It would be far more logical and expedient for the Assad administration to do so in the context of negotiations and power-sharing, than achieve this through bloody, prolonged and exhausting mop-up operations all over the Syrian vast interior. Meanwhile, for as long as the Assad administration refuses to negotiate – it is imperative for the West to assist and build the SLA as the genuine grassroots force capable to exerting real pressure on Damascus and compel viable negotiations to end the conflict.

Neither the complexities of the inner-Syrian struggle and the awakening of the deep interior, nor the advocated foreign intervention, should distract from the overall historic context of the crisis. At the core is the confrontation between resurgent Sunni Arab Islamism and the region's aspirant non-Arab Islamist hegemonic powers – Mahdivist Iran and neo-Ottoman Turkey. The Fertile Crescent of Minorities – from east to west counter-clockwise: Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds, Allawites, Druze, Maronites, Jews and Circassians – serves as the buffer preventing cataclysmic eruption. Only a viable Fertile Crescent of Minorities – of which the Allawites and Druze of Syria are presently the most beleaguered elements – can prevent the simmering Arab world from conjoining with the Islamist ascent of Turkey and Iran and cementing an explosive critical mass.



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ANALYSIS

The intense fighting since early 2012 coupled with the vastly improved manipulation of the Jihadists by Iranian intelligence (made possible largely by Abu Musab al-Suri and his followers) have already enabled the Assad administration to take control over the war in Syria. This means that Damascus once again effectively controls the strategic narrative – but not each region, let alone each incident. Hence, barring a major foreign intervention – by troops, fire-power, weapons and funding – the Assad administration should be considered over the hump, even though the predominantly Sunni insurrection will continue for months or even years to come. Presently, the primary explosive threat of the Syrian conflict is the growing dichotomy between the situation inside Syria and the relentless efforts by a myriad of external forces to exploit the conflict in pursuit of their regional and global interests.

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The current conflagration in Syria is multiple-layered. First is the crushing of the western part of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities by neo-Ottoman Turkey, Mahdivist Iran and a Sunni-Arab camp led by Qatar and Saudi Arabia in order to enable the leading blocs juggle for power. Second is the struggle between these blocs – a two-vs-one juggling – for determining the future of the Greater Middle East. Sub-plots here include the Saudi-initiated efforts to consolidate a north-south Sunni bloc with Turkey which Qatar is trying to take over; the Iranian desperation to sustain the Shiite reach to the Mediterranean via the HizbAllah; and the Turkish-Iranian on-off alliance to suppress and overlord the Arabs. Third is the internal dynamics within Syria that is discussed below. There are comparable struggles inside Iraq that are ignored because they are not as bloody as Syria's – but their strategic significance is identical.

Moreover, the Iranian hegemonic surge includes the myriad of operations in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula in order to consolidate their hegemony over Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Gulf States. For the industrialized West, this is the most important theater in the current upheaval in the Greater Middle East. The political working assumptions of the Arab governments are that (1) Iran has already crossed the nuclear threshold; and (2) that Tehran has decided to maintain Israel-style opacity in order not to aggravate an already tenuous situation. Both assumptions are factually correct. The conservative Arab governments, particularly Riyadh and Doha, are cognizant of both Tehran's Mahdivist commitment to the destruction of Israel in the context of liberating Islam's three holiest shrines in Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina which inevitably means the toppling of the House of al-Saud; and Jerusalem's reticence to unilaterally strike Iran despite the mounting threat. Hence, the real Iranian threat lies in the Iranian dominance of the region's oil and gas resources as well as their transportation to the industrialized West by pipe and tanker.

The real impact of a de-facto nuclear Iran lies in Iran's hegemonic umbrella over the Arabian Peninsula and especially the Shiite-populated east where the bulk of the oil and gas reserves are located. Iran effectively dominates energy-rich Iraq and wouldn't let go of Syria with its smaller oil reserves but crucial pipelines and Mediterranean ports, as well as Lebanon and its pipeline and port. And, of course, there are Iran's own vast oil and gas reserves, as well as preferential access to these of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Hence, as far as the industrialized West is concerned, Tehran – rather than traditional Riyadh and Doha – is the real "owner" and "controller" of the Persian Gulf's master spigot. In other words, the availability and price of oil now essentially depend on the good will of Tehran and to a far far lesser degree on that of Riyadh and Doha.



Concurrently, there's the mobilizing and radicalizing of the Arab street by all Islamist-Jihadist trends and administrations in the name of anti-Israel Jihad as the lowest common denominator that will buy some legitimacy to any one of these actors. Iran is both sponsoring and exploiting this trend via the HizbAllah, HAMAS, Islamic Jihad, and a host of al-Qaida-affiliated entities in order to sustain some legitimacy in an Arab World turning to the anti-Shiite Muslim Brothers.

And, above all, there lingers the question whether these fateful struggles be conducted under an Iranian nuclear umbrella or even a Saudi one (to be provided by Pakistan and the PRC).

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The security situation in Syria is also affected by internal dynamics. Modern Syria is essentially the balancing of three foci of power: (1) Security apparatus that relies on the Allawite, Druze and Kurdish minorities; (2) Urban-economic elite that relies on westernized Sunni families, Armenian and Christian minorities; (3) Radicalized and tribal Sunni population in the rural areas and increasingly the urban slums. Power in Damascus has always been based on two foci playing against the third. Starting the early-1970's, Rifaat al-Assad (brother of then president Hafez al-Assad and vice-president, and now exiled in Western Europe) consolidated an alliance between the security and economic elites that sustained stability in the country even after the exile of Rifaat and the death of Hafez.

Bashar al-Assad rose to power in July 2000 after the death of his father Hafez. He immediately promised the urban economic elite widespread reforms in return for their support for him succeeding his father. Instead of delivering, Bashar sought to transform the power system into an alliance with the radicalized Sunnis under Iranian umbrella. He expected the Syrian Islamists to be satisfied with financial handouts and growing involvement in regional Jihadist causes (Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian territories, etc.). Empowered and inherently anti-Shiite – the Islamists demanded more domestic power and Sunni-Islamist character for the state. When Bashar refused – they rebelled.

Throughout, the economic elite stayed out of the turmoil – thus facilitating the current crisis. The bombing in Aleppo starting February 2012 signaled a change whereupon the urban economic elite must get involved on the side that promises them more. This turning point is playing into the hands of the Bashar al-Assad administration.

This trend was also reflected in the popular support for the Assad administration to the extent that reliable polling is possible. In the second half of December 2011, YouGov conducted a major poll commissioned by the Qatar Foundation throughout the Arab World. The key question was whether Bashar al-Assad should resign. The poll found that 55 % of Syrians did not want Bashar al-Assad to resign as president – that is, 55 % of Syrians want him to remain president. Significantly, in a poll conducted in December 2010, that is, just before the outbreak of the current crisis, only 46 % of Syrians considered Bashar a good president for Syria. The YouGov poll also found that 68 % of Syrians disapproved of the Arab League sanctions.

In contrast, the YouGov poll showed that outside Syria 81 % of Arabs “want President Assad to step down”. The respondents based their opinion regarding Assad on the coverage of Syrian events on Arab Satellite TV news channels. In other words, Arab Satellite TV news channels such as the Qatar-based al-Jazeera and al-Arabia have had a profound impact on the regional public opinion in favor of the opposition to Assad while Syrian



domestic public opinion increased its support for Assad.

Meanwhile, the key to the government's strategy stating early 2012 is that Damascus divided Syria into three strategic zones on the basis of their importance for the survival of the Assad administration and the running of post-war Syria. The military priorities and resource allocation are based on this division.

1. The minorities' bloc that is comprised of the traditional lands of the minorities upon which the security apparatus relies. These are the Allawite strip along the Mediterranean coastline between Lebanon and Turkey, the Druze area in the southwest up-to the Jordanian and Israeli borders, and the Kurdish area in the northeast largely along the Turkish border but also part of the border with Iraq (where Syria's oil fields are located). Presently, these areas are essentially quiet with the local population committed to supporting the administration. The minorities' knowledge that they will be slaughtered under a Sunni-Jihadist administration only reinforces the commitment to Assad's Damascus.
2. The economic-strategic belt that is the area where the national economy (industry and commerce), as well as defense industries and strategic stockpiles, are located. Geographically, this is a relatively narrow strip between Damascus and Aleppo that includes the two key industrial cities Hama and Homs. This strip borders the Allawite strip on the west and the Druze area on the south, but also borders the Turkey on the northwest and north, and the rest of Syria on the east.
3. The vast interior that is comprised of essentially the rest of Syria to the east of the belt and to the south of the Kurdish zone. This area enjoys access to parts of the border with Turkey and the porous borders with Iraq and Jordan. This area is inhabited mainly by Sunni tribes and extended families, both conservative Arab and Islamists, that cross over to Iraq and Jordan. This area is economically depressed because of endemic absence of water and lack of infrastructure (roads, electricity, etc.), and therefore does not have great prospects for the future. Hence, this region has been the source of internal migration to urban slums in the main cities. These areas are implacably hostile to Damascus – that is, to ANY government in Damascus – because of unchangeable destitute and are thus susceptible to radicalization.

With the exception of the crucial slums in the main industrial cities in the economic-strategic belt and the Christian enclaves in the northeast – these strategic zones essentially overlap the three foci of power that make modern Syria. This explains the military strategy of the Assad administration.

In this context, the military operations in Syria become fairly logical – thus permitting assessment of the administration's and the rebels' prospects for success.

The ultimate priority of the Assad administration – to secure the traditional regions of the key minorities – has already been attained. There continue few clashes on the Jordanian and Turkish borders as a result of infiltration attempts. But these eruptions cannot alter the basic reality that the administration's hold over these regions is firm and the local population actively supports the administration and its war effort.

The second priority – to control the economic-strategic belt – is being implemented ruthlessly. The turning point came recently when the Assad administration concluded that the most crucial foci of the urban-economic elite in Aleppo and Damascus will not cast their lot with the rebels (and some even ponder supporting the administration). Consequently, government forces could safely focus on ruthlessly suppressing the radicalized Sunni population of the urban slums and blue-collar neighborhoods that stand in the way of the region's pacifi-



cation and return to some economic activities. This approach is largely successful because rebel presence is now contained to several slums and neighborhoods rather than spreading into the rural areas.

However, with the Jihadist elements holding firm and even escalating strikes from their parts of Homs and Hama – the administration's efforts become more ruthless and desperate to the point of ethnic cleansing some of the die-hard slums and neighborhoods in Homs and Hama. The secondary mission of the government's security forces is preventing the relentless efforts by Turkey-based Jihadist forces to reach Aleppo in order to provoke insurrection, as well as prevent a similar Jihadist infiltration from northeastern Lebanon into nearby Homs and on to Hama. But the Assad administration is adamant on suppressing the Jihadist insurrection in the economic-strategic belt at all cost, and will ultimately succeed if left to its own devices.

The third priority is reducing the level of Islamist-Jihadist insurrection in the vast interior, as well as slowing down the flow of Jihadist volunteers, weapons and funds from Turkey, Iraq and Jordan. The government's strategy was originally based on holding onto some of the key cities in the east to better control the Iraqi border, mainly Dar az-Zawr and Ar-Raqqah, as well as Abu-Kamal on the Iraqi border and the military city of Tadmur in the center – and let everything else burn. To fight the Jihadists, the government relies heavily on special operations, particularly by Iran-controlled Sunni Jihadist forces, in order to entrap and manipulate the Syrian Jihadist elements. Although the initial success of this approach is showing – this is a long term undertaking that will inevitably see some spectacular setbacks. However, since this approach saves Damascus massive use and spreading of regular military forces they don't have – this is not an illogical approach.

As discussed above, the traditional key to ruling Syria is an alliance between the security and economic elites. Presently, the Assad administration is well on its way to restoring this alliance between the two most important foci of power. The government's military control over the economic-strategic belt and the growing threat of Jihadist terrorism as demonstrated in Aleppo and Damascus leaves the urban-economic elite little choice but to cast their lot with the Assad administration. The only impediment is the lingering insurrection in Homs and Hama. The growing threats of foreign intervention is pushing the Assad administration to complete the crucial task of quickly and decisively pacifying Homs and Hama - thus raising the level of violence and the ruthlessness of the crackdown.

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But this turning-point is far from being the end of the Syrian saga.

The vast Syrian interior and western Iraq are jointly the theater in which the fateful struggle over the future of the Greater Middle East is being waged between neo-Ottoman Turkey, Mahdivist Iran and a Sunni-Arab camp led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. None can accept the pacification of Syria before their own grand-strategic and historic struggles have been decided. While Iran can live with the denial of the predominantly Sunni-tribal Syrian interior and western Iraq to non-Shiite forces in order to sustain the east-west Shiite axis – both Turkey and the Arab bloc must control these Sunni-tribal lands in order to sustain the north-south Sunni bloc they aspire for. Only such a Sunni bloc will be able to withstand and contain the Iranian-Shiite ascent over the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula.

Indeed, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are not going to give-up anytime soon on their historic quest to reverse the Shiite-Iranian ascent. Hence, the possible consolidation of Bashar al-Assad's reign and the restoration of the traditional alliance between the security and economic elites through the government's control of their



zones will neither stop the violence nor remove the likelihood of foreign intervention and flare-up of a wider regional conflict. On the contrary, the more stable the Assad administration becomes – the more determined Turkey and Qatar become to involve the industrialized West, that is NATO, in the military intervention ostensibly to topple the Assad administration, but actually reverse the Iran-Shiite axis. And herein lies the specter for the next explosion.

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In a desperate effort to avert this looming explosion, the UNSC empowered Kofi Annan in early April to explore the possibilities for a negotiated end to the Syrian crisis. Annan presented a six-point outline for further action that became known as the Annan plan. He also urged all belligerents to accept a cease-fire starting April 11 in order to build a conducive environment for the furthering of a diplomatic effort.

The key test of the Annan plan and cease-fire came on Friday, April 13, in the aftermath of the Friday Sermons when agitated and incited masses came out of the mosques ready to challenge anew the legitimacy of a non-Sunni-Islamist administration in Damascus. The sensitive element was the thin line between vocal and virulent anti-Assad protests and attempts by armed elements in the ranks of the demonstrators to capitalize on the mass of unarmed humanity in order to break through the lines of the security forces, instigate clashes and seize buildings of tactical significance. In Hama, such a provocation evolved into a major clash as government troops attempted to break up the demonstration in effort to reach their attackers and fell into rebel ambush. At least two were soldiers were killed in this clash.

There were also a few major efforts at violating the cease-fire. Overnight, a large armed group attempted to cross from Turkey into Syria near the village of Khirbet al-Joz in Idlib Province. They were engaged by Syrian security forces and pushed back across the border after a lengthy fire-fight. This is an area heavily patrolled by the Turkish security forces so that it is highly unlikely they were not aware of the infiltration attempt. Near Aleppo, rebel forces ambushed a military bus, killing two officers killed and wounding 24 soldiers. Altogether, some 15 fatalities were recorded in the first 24 hours of the cease-fire. In Damascus, government media warned that “the anti-government armed groups” were “intensifying criminal operations in an attempt to destabilize Syria and torpedo the [Annan] plan.” Meanwhile, the Islamist media continued to urge people to demonstrate and riot in the streets under the rallying cry “A revolution for all Syrians!”

Moreover, foreign leaders led by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her Turkish counterpart Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu began issuing unacceptable demands to the Assad administration in the context of implementing the Annan plan. Washington, Ankara and Doha lead the chorus demanding that the Syrian armed forces unconditionally withdraw from the entire inhabited and urban areas of Syria and surrender them to the rebel forces. They consider the reported withdrawals of Syrian government troops from major cities insufficient because the mere presence of these forces around the cities constituted undue pressure on the population in those areas. “This withdrawal must be total and comprehensive. Withdrawing from the cities but keeping the pressure on them doesn’t mean a real withdrawal. This withdrawal must be from all cities and towns to barracks and people must be assured they will not face another attack,” Davutoglu stated.

These demands are being made even though the Syrian armed forces have won the fight with the active support from key segments of the local population, and the majority of the urban population supports the Assad administration (or, at the least, prefer them to the Islamist-dominated opposition). Thus, the issue at



hand is not whether the Assad administration's security forces moved a few tanks and other armored vehicles a few more yards – but rather a challenge to the very existence of an Allawite-led nationalist government in Damascus. French president Nicolas Sarkozy dismissed the entire effort off hand. "I do not believe in Bashar al-Assad's sincerity, nor unfortunately in the cease-fire," he told French I-Tele TV.

Barring the commencement of viable negotiations involving the real protagonists inside Syria, the fighting in Syria will inevitably resume after a brief interlude and even escalate as the weather improves. The Annan plan will keep faltering even though Annan himself declared that he was "encouraged by reports that the situation in Syria is relatively calm and that the cessation of hostilities appears to be holding." Meanwhile, the United States, Turkey and Qatar will continue urging a Bosnia- and Libya-style NATO intervention in support of "legitimate representatives" rejected by the Syrian people and in the name of protecting civilians who have never asked for such intervention.

Thus, the primary explosive threat of the Syrian conflict is the growing dichotomy between the situation inside Syria and the relentless efforts by a myriad of external forces to exploit the conflict in pursuit of their own regional and global interests.

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As discussed above, the traditional key to ruling Syria has always been an alliance between the security and economic elites. The security elite have been dominated by the main minorities – the Allawites, Druze and Kurds – that remain staunchly loyal to the Assad administration. The economic elite have been dominated by Sunni urban families, as well as Armenian and Christian Orthodox families, in the main cities of western Syria – a strip between Damascus and Aleppo. Initially, the economic elite elected to stay out of the crisis and war, but are increasingly siding with the Assad administration – some by choice and some for lack of a better option.

By mid-April, the Assad administration is very close to restoring this alliance between the two most important foci of power. The Syrian armed forces have consolidated control over the economic-strategic Damascus-Aleppo belt. Moreover, the growing threat of Jihadist terrorism as demonstrated in Aleppo and Damascus has left the urban-economic elite little choice but to cast their lot with the Assad administration. The only impediment is the lingering insurrection in Homs and Hama which the cease-fire might help contain. The growing threats of foreign intervention is pushing Damascus to complete the pacification of Homs and Hama – albeit while markedly raising the level of violence and the ruthlessness of the crackdown.

The lingering problem is the Syrian deep interior. From a pure military point of view, the government's task is manageable. Violence and stability in the interior have negligible effect on the functioning of the Syrian state for this depends on the minority zones and the economic belt – both of which are under the effective control of the Assad administration. The primary tasks of Damascus are reducing the level of Islamist-Jihadist insurrection in the area, slowing down the flow of Jihadist volunteers, weapons and funds across the porous borders. Initially, the strategy of Damascus was based on holding onto some of the key cities in the interior and let everything else burn. To fight the Jihadists, Damascus relies heavily on special operations in order to entrap and manipulate both the Syrian and Qatar-sponsored foreign Jihadist elements. Ultimately, this strategy saves Damascus the need for massive use and widespread deployment of regular military forces Syria doesn't have without sacrificing the government's success.



However, in early spring there emerged a political imperative to reduce the level of fratricidal violence all over the country, as well as move forward toward a viable and legitimate negotiations process with grassroots populace. Furthermore, because of family and tribal connections between the rural population in the deep interior and the slum dwellers in the western cities, as well as the tribal population in the villages surrounding the western cities and in Aleppo itself – Damascus cannot ignore completely the popular dynamics and awakening in the interior. Thus, while this turmoil is incapable of threatening the Assad administration and continued consolidation of victory – it cannot be left completely unattended either.

The situation in Syria's predominantly interior is complex. The population is overwhelmingly Sunni, tribal and rural. The growing economic hardships of the last three decades, particularly the failure of the Soviet-style institutionalization of agriculture and the destruction of water resources mainly due to experimentation with cotton growing, led to grassroots alienation and rejection of the state system. Instead, the population has increasingly rallied around tribal and extended family frameworks in order to jointly survive the hardships. When blood-relation frameworks failed to remedy the situation – the youth abandoned the interior in quest for livelihood in either the urban slums in western Syria or in the ranks of the security forces that largely deployed near Syria's borders and away from the interior. Hence, the population that has endured the hardships and remained stable in the Syrian interior is socially conservative and inward looking – that is, committed to the empowerment of tribe and extended family at the expense of the centralized state. The lingering hardship, however, has left the grassroots population vulnerable to Islamist radicalization particularly by Gulf-origin charities that offered humanitarian assistance.

This unique posture is the key to the tumultuous and largely hostile relationship between the majority of Syrians and the internationally recognized opposition – the Syrian National Council [SNC]. Simply put, the Syrian grassroots dread, and are hostile to, any centralized administration and/or form of governance that attempts to interfere in their daily lives – be it the Assad administration in Damascus and its efforts to impose Ba'athism or the Islamist Ikhwan-affiliated SNC that is committed to a centralized Sunni-Islamist government in Damascus.

Meanwhile, as chaos spread throughout Syria and the government virtually stopped functioning, it has become evident to the grassroots in the interior that they cannot stay aloof and isolated from the overall dynamics. The traditional population, their tribal and extended family leaders, started gravitating toward the Syrian Liberation Army [SLA] – a loose coalition of like-minded localized forces and mini-groups. The SLA was formed in secrecy back in March 2011 by representatives of local coordination committees. As wider circles of tribal and extended family leaders sought framework for jointly resisting and enduring the crisis – they started coordinating and cooperating with the SLA. The SLA has relied on these grassroots components to organize regional forces to defend their own people. In March-April 2012, SLA leaders reported having over 32,000 fighters – mostly part-time local defense units spread over most of Syria. In addition, some 71,000 youth are ready to join but can't because of lack of weapons and ammunition. The tribes and rural population affiliated with the SLA are predominant in some 20 % of the Syrian territory – mostly in the deep interior. As well, SLA leaders reported having clandestine cells and armed networks across 80 % of Syria.

Presently, SLA military capabilities are abysmal despite widespread grassroots support. SLA forces are starved for everything – from weapons and ammunition to funds and supplies. However, even massive deliveries of weapons, funds and supplies will not alter the defused and locally focused character of the population that



makes the SLA. Nevertheless, for as long as the Bashar al-Assad administration refuses to negotiate – it is imperative for the international community to assist and build the SLA as the genuine grassroots force capable to exerting real pressure on Damascus and compel viable negotiations to end the conflict. Meanwhile, the SLA demonstrates their presence and relevance through the periodic explosion of car-bombs near Syrian security buildings in Aleppo and Damascus that are mostly perpetrated and claimed by the loosely affiliated Al-Nusra Front.

Thus, the Assad administration is winning at the national strategic level and there is nothing the SLA, or any other opposition entity, can presently do to reverse this trend. However, Assad's Damascus cannot ignore the ascent of the SLA because Damascus will ultimately have to demonstrate the cessation of armed opposition and establish control over the interior. It would be far more logical and expedient for Assad's Damascus to do so in the context of negotiations and power-sharing, than achieve this through bloody, prolonged and exhausting mop-up operations all over the Syrian vast interior.

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Meanwhile, the West, led by the US, Turkey and Qatar, is striving to repeat in Syria the legacy of the interventions in Bosnia and Libya irrespective of the realities on the ground or the desires of the local population. To justify such an intervention, the US leads a media campaign to portray the Syrian National Council [SNC] and the Free Syrian Army [FSA] as westernized and democratic when Arab governments and the Arab media know it is simply untrue.

The Syrian National Council has always been a front of the more militant-Jihadist wing of the Muslim Brothers [MB]. Once SNC leaders resolved to seek Western help and recognition, special effort was made by the MB leadership to conceal this relationship and pretend that the movement was led by westernized intellectuals as symbolized by SNC leader – the ostensibly secular dissident Burhan Ghalioun. However, Syrian MB leader Ali Sadr al-Din Bayanouni admitted in internal fora that the MB nominated Ghalioun as the SNC leader merely as a "front" because he would be palatable to the West. "We did not want the Syrian administration to take advantage of the fact that Islamists are leading the SNC," Bayanouni said. For his part, before becoming SNC leader, Ghalioun openly associated with the most conservative Islamist leaders and intellectuals of the MB and particularly MB's spiritual leader Sheikh Yussuf al-Qaradawi whom Ghalioun called "my inspiration".

Starting early spring 2012, the real threat to the indigenous opposition movement inside Syria was the ascent of Qatar's Jihadist Foreign Legion as a key player in the Syrian civil war. Buoyed by the success of its intervention in Libya, Doha sees itself as the rising power that will create a new regional posture post-Awakening/post-Intifada's that will regulate the extent of Turkish and Iranian influence and presence in the Sunni Arab World, as well as ensure the flow of oil and gas to the West (particularly since Doha is afraid of an imminent collapse of Saudi Arabia). Hence, in fall 2011 Qatar started building a Jihadist Foreign Legion to be able to intervene in Sunni contingencies throughout the greater Middle East. Qatar's Chief of Staff Maj.Gen. Hamas Ali al-Attiya is personally overseeing the military aspects of the program.

The first phase in the building of this Jihadist Foreign Legion was completed toward the end of 2011 in Hatay province, southwestern Turkey (across the border from Syria's Idlib province and the road to Aleppo). The Commander in Chief is Abdel Hakim Belhaj from Libya. His deputies are Al-Mahdi Hatari (the former commander of the Tripoli Brigade) and Kikli Adem (Belhaj's loyal right-hand man from his LIFG days). Both of



them repeatedly crossed into Syria for coordination with local Jihadist commanders in November-December 2011. There are also several Iraqi and Egyptian senior commanders and officers that are veterans of various anti-West Jihadist fronts.

The Legion's main headquarters is located in Antakya, in a converted Turkish military garrison. The force in Antakya is about 2,500 fighters strong. It is divided into three main elements. The main fighting units are two 1,000-strong Brigades: (1) the Libyan Brigade that is comprised mainly of LIFG mujahedin and Jihadist fighters trained in and by Qatar for the last war in Libya; and (2) the Iraqi Brigade comprised mainly of Iraqi Ansar al-Sunna mujahedin (that also keep conducting terrorist operations in Baghdad and the rest of Iraq) and a host of al-Qaida affiliated Jihadist entities in Iraq.

The third 500-strong element includes the training, logistics, intelligence and special operations elements. The majority of the personnel are Egyptians and Palestinians, as well as a few Gulf Arabs and a few North Africans. Significantly, most of them are veterans of the Special Forces and elite military units of their countries. As well, Pakistanis and Afghans provide training and logistics/maintenance cadres. A few Qatari officers control vital functions such as the communication links between the Libyan and Iraqi camps, and between the Legion and both the Turkish armed forces and military intelligence, and the Free Syrian Army [FSA]. The Jihadist Foreign Legion force in Antakya has its main facilities in the converted garrison in Antakya. The third element is based nearby. There are also two separate camps for the Brigades – a Libyan camp and an Iraqi camp. The Brigades also undergo intensive training for their forthcoming combat missions inside Syria.

By mid-December 2011, Doha, Ankara and the SNC leadership put tremendous pressure on the few remaining nationalist leaders in the Free Syrian Army to come under the umbrella of the Council and accept operational control via Qatar's Legion. In December, Turkey blocked all the bank accounts of the FSA in order to coerce them to accept the preeminence of the SNC. Consequently, in early January 2012, the FSA succumbed to pressure and signed an agreement with the SNC that would be guaranteed by Turkey and Qatar. According to FSA senior officers, by then Qatar's Jihadist Foreign Legion became their major source of weapons and funding, and Legion fighters joined them in escalating the insurgency in Idlib, Homs, Hama, and Jabal al-Zawiya.

Thus, the Free Syrian Army has never amounted to much of a force beyond the media claims of its Turkey-based leader Colonel Riad al-Asa'ad. Moreover, in order to guarantee recognition by, and support of, the Gulf States and the Arab Satellite TV news channels they own, the FSA stressed their relations with Jihadist elements. Indeed, Arab media is full of ceremonies in which various Jihadist elements such as the "God is Great Brigade" is shown swearing allegiance to the FSA and joining their Jihad. In Arabic, the FSA's war is a Jihad for the establishment of an Islamist state rather than merely topple President Bashar al-Assad. "To our fellow revolutionaries, don't be afraid to declare Jihad in the path of God. Seek victory from the One God. God is the greatest champion," this Brigade's commander declared while joining the FSA. "Instead of fighting for a faction, fight for your Nation, and instead of fighting for your [Syrian] nation, fight for God." Moreover, Doha and Ankara continue to ensure that the supplies they provide go to Islamist-Jihadist elements affiliated with, and controlled by, the key commanders of Qatar's Jihadist Foreign Legion.

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Meanwhile, the US-led interventionist policy leads to the needless aggravation and alienation of Russia – presently, a crucial supporter of the Assad administration. Moscow's basic strategy in the Middle East focused on



restoring stability and permitting Russia to bide its time as chaos reigns. In Syria, as in all other Arab states and Iran, Russia is looking out for its own interests and has no commitment to any specific government or ruler. Yevgeny Satanovsky, the president of the Middle East Studies Institute and one of the Kremlin's leading Middle East experts, stresses this point. "Russia's options regarding the situation around Syria are limited. ... Moscow's current strategy enables Russia to save face and bide time in its own interests." The Kremlin is apprehensive about foreign military interventions because of their strategic outcome and not the fate of the government of the attacked countries. "A strike on Iran or Syria, if it ever happens, will weaken those who launch it. And whether or not there are more regime changes in the Middle East is not Russia's problem," Satanovsky explains.

However, the Obama Administration insists that at the end of the crisis there will be a new government in Damascus as a result of a regime change. This government, Obama's Washington stresses, will not be beholden to any agreement signed by both the Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad administrations – including, specifically, the agreement with Russia on military installations in the ports of Tartus and Latakia. Whatever the importance to post-Cold War US national security of Russian presence on the shores of the Mediterranean – the mere unilateral assertion of this objective by the Obama White House has transformed the Russian involvement in Syria from bystanders to a determined effort to save their military presence and installations from a regime change. The Kremlin is fighting to protect and secure the Russian access to the Syrian ports and NOT the Assad administration – but the outcome is one and the same, and the results are showing in the military achievements of Assad's forces as well as the deterring of NATO intervention.

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Neither the complexities of the inner-Syrian struggle and the awakening of the deep interior, nor the travesty of the foreign intervention advocated by Washington, Ankara and Doha should distract from the overall historic context of the crisis. At the core is the confrontation between resurgent Sunni Arab Islamism and the region's aspirant non-Arab Islamist hegemonic powers – Mahdivist Iran and neo-Ottoman Turkey. The Fertile Crescent of Minorities – from east to west counter-clockwise: Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds, Allawites, Druze, Maronites, Jews and Circassians – serves as the buffer, preventing a cataclysmic eruption. Only a viable Fertile Crescent of Minorities – of which the Allawites and Druze of Syria are presently the most beleaguered elements – can thus prevent the simmering Arab Middle East from conjoining with the Islamist ascent of Turkey and Iran and jointly creating an explosive critical mass.

Hence, the main quandary is not whether Bashar al-Assad the individual remains in power, nor is it whether "his" administration survives the upheaval. The main challenge in resolving the Syria crisis is preventing the replacement of an Allawite-Druze dominated government by an Islamist-Jihadist regime. No less important is the imperative to restore and preserve a viable Syrian state via meaningful political reforms, as well as economic recovery and modernization of the entire region. Negotiations between the Syrian Liberation Army and the Assad administration should be launched on the establishment of a nationalist government in Damascus with emphasis on regionalization and diffusion of power that will ensure the rights of the Sunni Arab tribes, extended families and urban elite, as well as the nation's minorities. The transformation of power through negotiations will ensure that all pertinent international agreements Syria is beholden to will remain valid. Ultimately, the restoration of Syria as a key to the Fertile Crescent of Minorities remains the real vital interest of the West.



Thus, in addressing the turmoil in Syria special attention must be paid not to throw out the baby (Allawite-Druze preeminence) with the bath water (ending the fratricidal violence). Democratic reforms must acknowledge the country's Sunni majority and diversity of character and interests, but not at the expense of the preeminence of the Allawite-Druze in official Damascus. The marginalization and destruction of the Syrian section of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, even if in the name of democracy, not only will not elevate the Sunni majority but will cause cataclysmic upheaval throughout the greater Middle East.

There are no instant-gratification panacea solutions to the Syrian crisis. Western leaders must resist the temptation to seek such solutions just because there are ugly images of violence on the satellite TV news. The Arab Middle East, of which Syria is a crucial component, is currently experiencing a peak in a historic convulsion spanning a quarter of a millennium. Ultimately, the Arab Middle East will have to find their own solution for their own problem. Action by the West is not a guarantee for conflict resolution. Western intervention might be able to help alleviate the crisis, but Western intervention might also spark a cataclysmic eruption that will set the region aflame. Internalize what Albert Einstein said: "If I had one hour to save the world, I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and only five minutes finding the solution."

Recommendations for European Policy Makers

The situation in and around the greater Middle East is dominated by the all-powerful and inescapable Law of Unintended Consequences ("actions of people – and especially of government – always have adverse effects that are unanticipated or unintended"). Less famous and more nuanced than Murphy's Law ("anything that can go wrong will go wrong") – the Law of Unintended Consequences is an often ignored adage that human intervention in a complex system always creates unanticipated and undesirable outcomes. Alas, there is no escape – for the Law of Unintended Consequences is at work always and everywhere. The Law's quintessence is a dire warning against the hubristic belief that humans – particularly Western leaders – can fully control the world around them. A cursory examination of the outcome of the vast majority of Western interventions since the end of the Cold War demonstrates just how prevalent the Law of Unintended Consequences is and will always be.

Neither the complexities of the inner-Syrian struggle and the awakening of the deep interior, nor the travesty of the advocated foreign intervention should distract from the overall historic context of the crisis. Only a viable Fertile Crescent of Minorities – of which the Allawites and Druze of Syria are presently the most beleaguered elements – can prevent the simmering Arab Middle East from conjoining with the Islamist ascent of neo-Ottoman Turkey and Mahdivist Iran and jointly creating an explosive critical mass.

Hence, the main quandary is not whether Bashar al-Assad the individual remains in power, nor is it whether "his" administration survives the upheaval. The main challenge in resolving the Syria crisis is preventing the replacement of an Allawite-Druze dominated government by an Islamist-Jihadist regime. No less important is the imperative to restore and preserve a viable modern Syrian state via meaningful political reforms, as well as economic recovery and modernization.

Negotiations between the Syrian Liberation Army and the Assad administration should be launched on the establishment of a nationalist government in Damascus with emphasis on regionalization and diffusion of



power that will ensure the rights of the Sunni Arab tribes, extended families and urban elite, as well as the nation's minorities. Only the transformation of power through such negotiations will ensure that all pertinent international agreements Syria is beholden to will remain valid. Ultimately, the restoration of Syria as a key to the Fertile Crescent of Minorities remains the real vital interest of the West.

Thus, in addressing the turmoil in Syria special attention must be paid not to throw out the baby (Allawite-Druze preeminence) with the bath water (ending the fratricidal violence). Democratic reforms must acknowledge the country's Sunni majority and diversity of character and interests, but not at the expense of the minorities. The marginalization and destruction of the Syrian section of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, even if in the name of democracy, not only will not elevate the Sunni majority but will cause cataclysmic upheaval throughout the greater Middle East.

There are no instant-gratification panacea solutions to the Syrian crisis. Western leaders must resist the temptation to seek such solutions just because there are ugly images of violence on the satellite TV news. The Arab Middle East, of which Syria is a crucial component, is currently experiencing a peak in a historic convulsion spanning a quarter of a millennium. Ultimately, the Arab Middle East will have to find their own solution for their own problem. Action by the West is not a guarantee for conflict resolution. Western intervention might be able to help alleviate the crisis, but Western intervention might also spark a cataclysmic eruption that will set the region aflame. Western leaders should internalize what Albert Einstein said: "If I had one hour to save the world, I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and only five minutes finding the solution."

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.