

The War in Syria or The Threads of a Blood Stained Carpet

Report of a fact-finding mission in support of a political solution of the conflict

We, the undersigned, who have been actively engaged for a considerable part of our lives in political projects on behalf of the oppressed peoples of Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Palestine, undertook a two week journey to Beirut and Damascus between August 29 and September 12, 2012. From the very start we considered our work to be an initial fact-finding mission preparatory to a larger and more important endeavour, a peace-finding mission in Syria of high ranking personalities from the international civil society community to take place in one or two months.

During this fact-finding mission we had the opportunity to talk to representatives of nearly all the political forces involved in the Syrian conflict. All of these openly reject any foreign military intervention and are principally disposed to put an end to the violence and repression, which has, in most parts of the country, led to an undeclared civil war.

Therefore the analysis we are presenting in this preliminary report will attempt to be as objective as possible. It will reflect less, our own diverse viewpoints on the situation and more the opinions of the great variety of people we interviewed. For security reasons we will not mention the names of our sources, but only indicate the political milieu to which they belong. If there are contradictions between the different statements, we will present them as such, leaving the task of evaluation to the reader rather than ourselves.

Since we cannot pretend to be either complete or exhaustive, we consider this report only as a preliminary effort, which hopefully will be followed by others who take the same risks to come to the region in order to observe the dramatic scenarios of one of the most complex conflicts of our times.

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I. History and Structure of the Regime

Some of our sources were veterans from the opposition, who have spent more than ten years in prison during the regime of Hafez Assad, father of Bashar al Assad. According to Dr. Fayez Fawas a very respected leader of the opposition (one of the founding fathers of the Syrian Communist Party), from the very beginning of the Syrian regime in 1970, it has been based on the army and the security forces on the one hand and on the other, the Baath party, with more than one million affiliates: “The army – whether we like it or not - is the State,” one of the opposition leaders said. “If it is destroyed, Syria will no longer exist as a sovereign state.” During the cold war, Hafez created a so-called National Front to exercise his absolute control over political life, outlawing trade unions, as well as leftist parties and the Muslim Brotherhood. “All orders came from above”, he said, and the people generally tolerated this order, since he distributed large amounts of land and exercised a policy of full employment. On the other hand, the many rival security forces (according to sources, there are actually 16 in the country) exercised their power to the degree that they even had to give permission for marriages, according to one interviewee.

The problems started when, as in 1976, larger movements emerged against the invasion of Lebanon; with a movement of lawyers in 1979 who defended the Muslim Brotherhood and called for the democratization of society; and finally in 1982 when the entire city of Hama was completely destroyed in a massacre of thousands of people. In contrast to his father, Bashar al Assad could never manage the pyramidal structure that he was chosen to lead in 2000, as a replacement for his brother who died suddenly in a car accident. “He is not a real politician, but conducts the State, together with his wife, like a public relations officer,” said one of the interviewees who knew him personally. During his tenure however he opened the door to neoliberal privatization and encouraged, or tolerated the informal speculative activities of an emerging neo-oligarchy close to him, which, according to Salim Kheirbek, another opposition leader who has spent more than 10 years in prison,, increased enormously the gap between the rich and the poor, especially in the countryside, which amounts to more than 30 percent of the total population. As a consequence of this, more than one million people emigrated, principally to Lebanon, Jordan, the Gulf States and Greece.

II. From Conflict to War

According to this information, we can understand how the country came into a crisis, which manifested itself first in a broad, unexpressed social discontent among the lower classes, especially among the Sunni population that amounts to about 55 percent of the total population. Unlike the other religions like the Alawites, Shiites and different Christian denominations (mainly Russian and Syrian orthodox as well as Roman Catholic) the Syrian Sunnis had found a political reference point in the Muslim Brotherhood, who, according to a Palestinian leader, have always been more dogmatic than their Egyptian, Tunisian or Turkish counterparts.

With all these factions, it is important to remember that nearly all Syrians are used to living in a nationalist tradition without particular preference for any religion. Therefore, when the protests suddenly erupted in Daraa on March 18th 2011 the local conflict, according to an eyewitness, was more influenced by the general discontent with the local authorities, the mayor of the town and the security forces, than by any ideological vision. The spark was supplied by the so-called “Arab Spring”. What then followed in Homs, Hama, Idlib and other places was a truly popular movement first demanding democratic reforms and later, as these demands failed to yield any results, the fall of the Assad regime by non-armed protesters.

“It is true that the security forces intervened,” Dr. Bouthaina Shabaan, the very renown special advisor to the president told us in Damascus, “but we have said from the very beginning that there were arms involved. They are killing our best people and now they are attacking airports like the Israelis do.”

This discussion, “who threw the first stone” and “who shot the first bullet”, as awkward as it may seem in a conflict, which, according to UN figures has cost more than 20,000 lives, has become the corner stone of a whole political architecture on both sides of the conflict. The government uses it to justify its enormous increase in the repression of the popular movement: the other side uses it to call for outside intervention as in Libya.

“I have never seen a foreigner in my East Damascus neighbourhood, but I have seen many death squads running around after the explosion of bombs”, says one of the participants of a popular movement in the outskirts of Damascus, which is only one of the many battlegrounds of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Other witnesses say that the persecution of victims and the practice of mass executions seem to be a common occurrence in this unequal confrontation between the paramilitary groups of the opposition and the Shabiha (militias) who work in close coordination

with the security forces and the army. It is very difficult to evaluate the relationship between the militarized forces. The insurgents we have interviewed say there are approximately 40,000 armed people on their side while the Syrian army is generally calculated to number 160,000 and is one of the best equipped in the whole region. There have been individual defectors from the army, but it has never happened that an entire company has switched sides, according to AVAAZ, a source that is generally well informed. The army has not used its entire capacity, most likely out of fear of losing control, as otherwise it is not clear or understandable, “It is always the 4th and the 10th Battalion, the so-called Special Forces, and the 52nd Brigade which are operating. They must be tired by now.” these sources said.

The army as such was not much implicated in interreligious conflicts, which have increased during the conflict. This at least is what the director of a non-governmental newspaper said when we asked him in Damascus: “... because within the army there are also members of different religious denominations.” Others declared that the security forces as well as militias have participated in these sectarian confrontations. However, the soldiers are not protecting the civilian population; quite the contrary. They generally use their firepower from distant ranges, from the air, or on the ground to destroy the entire areas where the battles take place. In this way, for example, more than half of Homs has been completely devastated.

One of our interviewees said that “inside Syria the only power is the gun,” and the coordinator of a squadron in Damascus claims that there cannot be any “liberated zones in Syria as long as they can be reached by rockets and aircraft.” From this there can be only one conclusion: a high intensity war, which many describe as a “civil war”, is taking place in Syria, which neither side is capable of winning militarily. The rest is kept by the silence of the graveyards and the enormous quantity of people who are on the move.

The figures of 1.2 million internal refugees and 250,000 in the neighbouring countries seem to be conservative. The director of CARITAS-Lebanon, for example, challenges the official version that there are only 60,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon: “There must be at least 150,000,” he says.

Interviewing these refugees reveals that the basic sentiment of the great majority of the Syrian population can be characterized by only one word: FEAR. Fear of the bombings, fear of getting into the cross-fire, fear of having their throat cut by inhuman extremists on either side, and fear of not being able to make it to the border. It cannot be said that the majority of the people stands on one side of the conflict or the other, because there are many, especially within the middle classes, who definitely oppose the regime of Bashar al Assad, but who are even more afraid of the “time after”. There are also many who (often without wanting it) got involved with the armed resistance and who are as much afraid of their own military incompetence as they are bombs from the airplanes.

All these elements have to be taken into consideration when asking the question: who is winning the war? The answer is: NOBODY!

III. Diversity in the Opposition

It is very difficult to characterize the nature of the Syrian opposition. There is the strong social ingredient, especially in the lower strata of the population, in the suburban areas, and in the countryside. But this is not everything. There continues to be a politicized and educated minority who are struggling for democracy in a politically articulated way.

Among them are many intellectuals, such as the ones we had a chance to talk to in Damascus, who spent years in the prisons of Hafez al Assad for their participation in the movements and leftist parties they helped to create. Others are living now abroad, many of them in Paris. Like Haytham Manna, the vice-president of the opposition coalition called the “National Coordination Body for Democratic Change” and Michel Kilo, a university professor at the Sorbonne who can count on many supporters and a certain organizational infrastructure inside the country.

For all of these leftist and left-liberal democrats the uprisings in March 2011 were considered to be an opportunity to realize the democratic change they have been struggling for throughout all their lives. Two of them, Dr. Fayez Fawas and Salim Kheirbek wrote a letter to the President to this effect one week after the first unrest in Daraa, but they did not receive any timely response. Only months later an army general showed up to ask them further explanations.

They were not the only ones on a high level to press for democracy, reflecting the will of the Syrian people in the streets. Some highly-placed representatives of the Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas told us that Bashar al Assad has been visited personally and urged to produce democratic reforms as quickly as possible. According to these sources, even the Vice-President of Syria and some of his ministers were in favour of a political solution of the conflict, a perspective with which the president formally agreed.

However it took the President nearly one year and cost the Syrian population more than 10,000 lives before he issued the so-called “Democratic Reforms” in February, 2012. According to two Syrian parliamentarians we interviewed, these constitutional reforms consisted of mainly three points:

- 1) End the provisions in the old constitution that the only party in Syria should be the Baath Party. This reform established that, in the upcoming elections for parliament, the Baath party could “only” unite 67 percent of the votes, while 25 percent of the parliamentarians were to be so-called “independent” candidates.
- 2) Renew and extend civil liberties, e.g. the right to demonstrate and create independent media. This reform was in sharp contrast to the extreme violence and systematic killings the protesters suffered every day.

- 3) Respect for cultural differences. This disposition was intended to maintain the ban on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafits and other Islamic organizations that are considered be attempting to establish religious rule by introducing the Sharia.

It was clear to all of our interviewees outside of the Syrian government that these “reforms” were not only extremely weak in their institutional form (they were written without consultation with the government itself) and their content (e.g. ruling out the Muslim Brotherhood as a political option for democratic participation), but they also came out at a peak moment in the military confrontations.

On the other hand, this fact indicates that there must have been some tensions within the government or between an “inner circle” which pressed for a military solution by exterminating the opposition on the ground at any cost (political and humanitarian) and an “outer circle” of the regime that recommended a negotiated solution from the beginning of the conflict.

On the side of the opposition, the division is even greater between those who believe in a political solution and those who call for an armed revolution with a strong support or even an open intervention from other countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, France and the United States. In this case the first had to succumb to the second due to the extreme polarization of the conflict and also because the “militarists” are being instigated by the Salafits and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood who compose the Syrian National Council (SNC) and spend most of their time in Turkey or in the Gulf States. However, according to the interviews with people on the ground, the real impact of the latter should not be overestimated, despite the considerable amount of weapons they managed to produce among their rank and files. “The Salafits in Homs started out with 11 affiliates, and now there are perhaps 500,” said one activist who has lost seven members of his family.

In fact we got the impression that among the different political and military groups inside Syria there is very little coordination. This is due to a great extent to a persistent security crackdown and the army’s capacity to control many of the cities, even when it cannot control the countryside. It is also due to the fact that the Free Syrian Army has not been able to create a General Command for reasons we are unable to determine. “The Free Syrian Army is not an organization, but a brand that every fighter takes on,” said one of our interviewees, He told us that when he came to a village in the area around Idlib, he found two units of the FSA who were fighting each other: “One was from a tribe and the other belonged to a group of drug smugglers.”

Even if there are great efforts being made to create coordination, at least on the regional level, the popular movement is still far from having any coherent structure. This presents a problem for the army and security forces to wipe out the rebels, since there is no visible or invisible head for them to chop off. On the other hand, it also makes it difficult for the movement and the fighters to articulate

themselves politically. The absence of a Front and/or a general military command, such as has existed and presently exists in many other armed conflicts in the world, has to be analysed in order to proceed to a more comprehensive understanding of the Syrian opposition. At the same time, this absence results in a serious handicap to the prospects for a sustainable political solution in Syria: there is no legitimate political and/or social authority to address to achieve a higher level of coordination.

IV. On Foreign Intervention and Sectarianism

All of our sources indicated that the conflict, which already has all the characteristics of an open civil war, has gotten out of hand, because there are too many outside forces involved. "It is world war on Syrian grounds," says one representative of the civil opposition. In fact, if the conflict had the logic of national interests, it would have been solved in one way or another a long time ago, for economic reasons alone. "In 18 months Syria, which was one of the very few countries without foreign debt, has lost 150 billion dollars," the sources point out, "It will take more than 30 years to recover from this war."

Since the outbreak of the conflict, nearly all the major powers of the world have discovered their own geopolitical interests in Syria, which they consider to be a cornerstone in the political architecture of the Middle East. Since the time of the cold war, Hafez Assad's Syria has become one of the closest allies of the former Soviet Union, and even now, Russia maintains there its most important military base in the region.

On the other side, according to the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Lebanon, the United States has developed an alliance with what President Obama calls "moderate Islam" in Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia (in spite of the Wahabi-fundamentalism there), which is supporting militarily the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. A Palestinian leader in Damascus even said: "Obama has become the main political guide for the Muslim Brotherhood", and adds: "If this revolution is going to end corruption, I want to be part of it, but if King Abdallah claims to lead it, we cannot believe in it."

"Qatar and Turkey are pretending to undermine the regime of Bashar al Assad, but in reality they want to destroy Syria," says a high ranking leader of the Arab National Congress. Asked why this is the case, an outstanding member of the Lebanese Hezbollah analyzes the situation in the following way:

"After the withdrawal of the US-troops from Iraq, a strategic corridor opened up from Teheran to Bagdad to Beirut and to Damascus. A new strategic alliance is being formed from which only Cairo is excluded. What is at stake in Syria is not democracy, but the strategic equilibrium of the whole Middle East. We cannot allow the main front against Zionism and imperialism to be diverted."

This is also the reason why the conflict took on a religious dimension, especially for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafits participating in the war. Nearly all of our interviewees agreed that, although the conflict is not a religious one as such, the controversies between Sunnis and Shiites, including the Alawites, and between Muslims and Christians are being used by the rebels as a tool for their political ambitions, filling an ideological void that exists in the entire resistance movement. At the same time, the same sectarian approach is being reported from the governmental side based on the Alawi sect who provides the pro-regime militias called Shabiha.

V. Proposals for Peace through Political Dialogue

All of these factors taken together make it tremendously difficult, not only to analyse the situation, but also to think of a way out of this avalanche of bombs and bloodshed, which continues to plague the great majority of Syrian people every day and every night. Throughout our fact-finding mission, it has become clear that in spite of the complexity of the conflict, the diversity of the different approaches, and the extreme polarisation, there is one thing agreed upon by the overwhelming majority of the population as well as the most highly placed and articulate political leaders, whether from the government or the opposition, from the refugees inside and outside the country: WE MUST STOP THE VIOLENCE!

But how can we do that? This is also the great question we asked ourselves during our entire trip. What can we recommend, being just ordinary members of civil society from different countries in Europe, who are every day becoming more anxious about how to inform the world about what is happening in Syria? We are not official mediators; therefore we cannot pretend to influence the big players to change their basic attitude towards this conflict of geopolitical interests of such enormous dimensions.

What we can do is to convince the people wherever they are that there is urgent need for a dialogue in order to transform the military conflict into a political one. In most of our interviews, we detected the will to enter into such a dialogue - even if they say that the other side does not want it.

In order not to avoid any pretexts we have come to the conclusion that this dialogue must take place without any preconditions. Neither the immediate fall of the regime's leadership – specifically Assad's resignation- nor the immediate disarmament of the opposition forces, let alone the withdrawal of the army can be the condition for such a dialogue.

Every real and socially/politically rooted force that is really willing to engage in this dialogue should participate in it. What is necessary is the emergence of a new kind of political force that demonstrates

to the world that peace is not only necessary, but also possible – an active force that can increase every day in the poor neighbourhoods and residential areas, in the governmental sectors and within the opposition forces, at the military roadblocks and at the roadblocks of the resistance forces.

Such a dialogue should consist of many dialogues on the local and regional level. The priority should be given to the immediate needs of the population: healthcare, food, shelter and security. The latter should be provided by unarmed Human Rights committees, who should be in permanent negotiations with the armed forces on both sides of the conflict.

At the same time that this occurs, a national dialogue should be initiated in Syria or in some other country. This national dialogue should establish the conditions for a permanent ceasefire as well as the rules for the political game of a democratic transition. Both sides, the government as well as the opposition forces, should assign representatives to the national dialogue, as an autonomous entity with a mandate to organize a process leading towards free elections of a constituent assembly.

All of these efforts do not preclude the mediation efforts that are presently being made by the governments who are presently exercising their influence on Syria. On the contrary, one does not go without the other. Only one thing should be clear from the very beginning:

THERE MUST BE A SYRIAN SOLUTION OR THERE WILL NOT BE ANY SOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT AT ALL!

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