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Syria

Militarization, military intervention and the absence of strategy

- Features -

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I was able to attend the meeting of the Syrian opposition that was held on October 8-9 in Sweden, near the capital Stockholm. A number of male and female activists operating in Syria and abroad joined with prominent figures from the Syrian Coordination Committee (SNC - who had come from Syria for the event) in the presence of the most prominent member of the Syrian National Council – its president, Burhan Ghalioun.

The organizers of the conference had invited me to speak on the subject of foreign military intervention in the current situation in Syria. My talk was met with interest and I was asked to write it down (I had delivered it verbally relying only on bullet points). I promised to do so, but a busy schedule prevented me from making good on that promise until now.

Then came the rush of events on the Syrian scene in the past days and a rise in the tone of the discussion surrounding military intervention and the militarization of the crisis, which were the two subjects of my talk in Sweden. These developments prompted me to carry out my promise before it becomes too late. I will therefore elaborate here the views that I expressed in Sweden, updated with commentary on the most recent developments pertaining to the topic.

My talk at the October conference was preceded by one of the attendees directing a question to Burhan Ghalioun about his stance, or the stance of the SNC, on requests for military intervention in Syria. Ghalioun answered that this subject is not discussed presently because there is no country that wants to intervene militarily in Syria at the moment, and so “when we are faced with such willingness, we will adopt the appropriate position.”

I began my talk by stressing that the Syrian opposition must define a clear stance on the issue of foreign military intervention, since it is clear that its position has a major influence on whether or not intervention might take place. The reluctance regarding direct intervention that we see today on the part of Western and regional states might change tomorrow if intervention requests made on behalf of the Syrian opposition were to increase.

It was the Libyan National Council's request for international military intervention at the beginning of March that paved the way for the similar request issued by the Arab league, and the subsequent resolution of the UN Security Council. Had the Libyan opposition opposed direct military intervention in all its forms (instead of just opposing intervention on the ground and requesting air support as it did), the Arab League would not have sought intervention nor would such action have been sanctioned by the UN.

Libya and the Costs of Foreign Military Intervention

In my talk, I dwelled on lessons from the Libyan experience as someone who had participated in the discussions about it. Like the vast majority of the Arab public, I had expressed my understanding for the fact that the Libyan rebels were compelled to appeal to foreign support in order to avert the wholesale massacre that could have occurred had Gaddafi's forces managed to storm the uprising's strongholds in Benghazi, Misrata, and other areas, since the rebels lacked military means to repel such an attack at that time.

We placed all of the blame on Gaddafi for creating the conditions of foreign intervention, while warning the Libyan rebels against any illusion regarding the intentions of the Western forces that were intervening ostensibly on their behalf. Indeed, foreign military intervention in the Libyan state came with a high price that can be summarized as

follows:

– The immediate political price of foreign intervention was that it allowed Gaddafi to pretend that he somehow represented national sovereignty and to label the rebels as agents of Western imperialism. This influenced a segment of Libyan society, albeit a limited one.

A no-fly zone over Syria will either have a very limited benefit if it is to remain a no-fly zone in the strictest sense, or it will have devastating consequences in killing and destruction if it is to take the form of an all-out air war against the regime.—The more serious political price was that the intervening powers strove to hijack decision-making from the Libyan rebels. They did not stop at ending the attack on the uprising's strongholds and preventing Gaddafi from using his air power. They went much further, destroying the Libyan air force (Western states, especially France and Britain, are eagerly looking forward to selling weapons to post-Gaddafi Libya) as well as a significant portion of Libya's infrastructure and official buildings (Western states along with Turkey started to compete over the Libyan reconstruction market even before Gaddafi's regime had fallen). Western powers refused to provide the Libyan rebels with the weapons that they had urgently and insistently requested in order to enable them to carry on liberating their country without direct foreign intervention. Weapons were only delivered (by Qatar and France) during the late stages of the battle. These limited infusions of weapons hastened the fall of Gaddafi's regime after a military stalemate had long been in place.

– The goal of Western powers was to impose themselves as major participants in the war against Gaddafi's regime so that they might steer it. They wanted to draw a roadmap for post-Gaddafi Libya and they even set up an international committee for this purpose. They also tried for a while to reach an agreement with the Gaddafi family behind the backs of the Libyan National Council. As a result, Libya's fate was being drawn up in Washington, London, Paris and Doha more so than in Libya itself prior to the liberation of Tripoli. To be sure, the Western states' desire to control the situation in Libya after Gaddafi was extremely delusional, just as we expected. However, this comes along with great chaos in Libya today, aggravated by foreign meddling be it Western or regional.

Syria: Between Libya and Egypt

And yet, the impression that prevails at present is that foreign intervention prevented the crushing of the Libyan uprising, which, had it occurred, would have terminated the revolutionary process throughout the Arab region. Intervention enabled the Libyan rebels to liberate their country from the clutches of their brutal dictator at a cost that pales in comparison to the price paid by Iraqis in their liberation from Saddam Hussein's tyrannical regime by way of a foreign invasion. The occupation of Iraq is finally coming to an end after eight miserable years, during the course of which the country reached a low point and paid an exorbitant human and material price, only to face now an obscure and menacing future.

The result of this contrast between Libya and Iraq is that, while the latter example was quite repulsive in the eyes of Syrians, the Libyan example has instilled within many a desire to emulate it. This is reflected in the increased requests for international military intervention following the liberation of Tripoli, to the point of calling the mobilization day on October 28 "No-Fly Zone Friday."

Yet, whoever imagines that the Libyan scenario could be replicated in Syria is sorely mistaken. The Syrian opposition must be aware that the cost of allowing direct foreign military intervention (as opposed to indirect intervention such as providing arms) in Syria will be much higher than in the Libyan case for several reasons, the most important of which may be summarized as follows:

The national opposition must not allow the regime to outbid it in the defense of the national cause, and it must realize

that since Syria's territory is partially occupied by Israel with the support of Western states, it must not seek help from the enemies of Syria and its oppressors.—The military situation in Syria is very different from what it was in Libya. The latter country is characterized by the presence of urban centers separated by often vast stretches of quasi desert territory. In such circumstances, air power becomes essential, especially since the areas controlled by the Libyan rebels were almost devoid of supporters of the regime. Thus, the regime resorted to air power in its counter-revolutionary offensive, and foreign air support was therefore highly effective in protecting the rebel areas and limiting the movement of regime forces outside of inhabited areas, all this at a relatively limited cost to civilian life. By contrast, Syria's population density is much greater than Libya's, and so is the mix of opponents and supporters of the regime, preventing the Syrian regime from making extensive use of air strikes. Therefore, a no-fly zone over Syria will either have a very limited benefit if it is to remain a no-fly zone in the strictest sense, or it will have devastating consequences in killing and destruction if it is to take the form of an all-out air war against the regime as happened in Libya. Since the Syrian army's defensive capabilities are much more significant than those of Gaddafi's forces, the scale and intensity of the combat would be much greater in Syria, not to mention that the Syrian regime is not isolated as Gaddafi was and any foreign military intervention in Syria would thereby ignite the entire region, which is but a set of powder kegs.

Meanwhile, no Syrian city currently faces the danger of a large-scale massacre in the way Benghazi did, or even a fate comparable to that of the Syrian city of Hama in 1982, when the Assad regime was able to isolate it from the rest of the country.

The strength of the Syrian uprising lies in that it acquired a very broad extension, and the fact that the rebels did not make the mistake of taking up arms, which, had it happened, would have greatly weakened the momentum of the popular uprising and allowed the regime to eliminate it more easily.

The Syrian rebels have thus far relied upon forms of struggle such as night-time protests and Friday demonstrations (not for religious reasons, but because Fridays are official vacation days and it is difficult for the regime to prevent gathering in mosques), so that most of the participants do not get exposed. This style of guerilla-like demonstration is the appropriate method when a popular uprising faces brutal suppression by an overwhelming military force.

Unlike Gaddafi's caricatural regime, which years ago turned towards establishing strong economic, security, and intelligence cooperation with various Western states, the Syrian regime in the eyes of the US is still a stumbling block to its projects in the region, since it is allied with Iran and Hezbollah and sustains a range of Palestinian forces opposed to US-sponsored capitulation.

Acknowledging this reality does not in any way suggest that one must therefore refrain from supporting people's demands for democracy and human rights, whether in Syria or Iran. It requires, however, to be taken into account in the way the Iranian opposition does, which completely rejects foreign military intervention in the affairs of its country and defends its country's right to develop nuclear power in the face of Israeli-American threats that attempt to prevent it from doing so by claiming that Iran is developing nuclear weapons.

One of the principal focuses of the Syrian revolution's strategy must be to win the Syrian army's ranks over to the revolution's side. The Syrian opposition correctly criticizes the regime for its opportunism, citing its intervention in Lebanon in 1976 against the Palestinian resistance and the Lebanese National Movement, as well as its joining with the US-led coalition in the 1991 war against Iraq. Those who criticize the Syrian regime's duplicity with regard to the national cause must not accredit its claim that it is currently fighting Western powers' "agents," by requesting military intervention from those same Western powers. The national opposition must not allow the regime to outbid it in the defense of the national cause, and it must realize that since Syria's territory is partially occupied by Israel with the support of Western states, it must not seek help from the enemies of Syria and its oppressors. Were they to intervene, these powers would surely strive to weaken Syria strategically just as they weakened Iraq.

Toppling a regime, no matter what the regime, is a strategic goal for which the means differ according to case and country. The strategy depends on the makeup of the regime that the revolutionaries are trying to bring down.

Let us consider the difference between the cases of Egypt and Libya for example. In Egypt the regular army as an institution was and remains the backbone of the regime. Mubarak's power emanated from and relied upon the army, but he did not "own" it. This made the popular uprising keen on keeping the army neutral in order to topple the despot. This strategy succeeded, although it fostered illusions among the masses that the army as an institution with its top brass could be a selfless servant of the people. Instead of honing the critical awareness of the people and the soldiers and warning them that the army's top brass would strive to preserve its privileges and control over the state, the principal forces of the opposition movement actually contributed to spreading illusions among the masses. The result is that the Egyptian revolution has remained incomplete; in fact, there are as much elements of continuity in the Egyptian regime as elements of change, if not more indeed.

In Libya, on the other hand, Gaddafi had dissolved the military institution and restructured it in the form of brigades bound to his person through tribal, familial and financial ties. Thus, it was impossible to rely on the neutrality of the military, let alone draw them to the side of the revolution; rather, it was inevitable that the way to topple the Libyan regime was through defeating its armed forces, in other words through war. Since the balance of military force between Gaddafi's forces and the virtually unarmed rebels was overwhelming, the entrance of an external factor into the equation was inevitable, whether in the form of arming the uprising (the best-case scenario) or through direct participation in the war between the rebels and the regime either by occupying the country (the worst-case scenario) or through bombing from a distance without invasion, as happened in Libya. The result is that the change in Libya is much deeper than in Egypt because of the general collapse of the Gaddafi regime's institutions. Today, Libya is a country without a state, i.e. without an apparatus that monopolizes armed force, and nobody knows when a state will be rebuilt there, or what it will look like.

So where does Syria fit into this strategic equation? Actually, it falls somewhere in between the Egyptian and Libyan cases. In Syria, just as in Libya, the regime has surrounded itself with Special Forces bound to it by family, religious sect, and privilege. They need to be defeated if the regime is to fall. In this regard, the commander of the Syrian Free Army, Colonel Riyad al-Asâ€™ad, was right when he told Al-Sharq Al-Awsat (5 November 2011) that "anyone who thinks that the Syrian regime will fall peacefully is dreaming."

However, because Israel occupies a piece of its territory, Syria, unlike Libya, has also a regular army based on universal conscription of young men, and whose soldiers and low-ranking officers reflect the makeup of the Syrian people from which their ranks are derived. Therefore, one of the principal focuses of the Syrian revolution's strategy must be to win the Syrian army's ranks over to the revolution's side.

The Role of the Army in the Opposition's Strategy

Direct military intervention in Syria, would convince the soldiers that what the regime kept claiming since the beginning of the uprising, i.e. that it is facing a "foreign conspiracy" that wants to subjugate Syria, has been true all along. Had the Syrian uprising been headed by a leadership with a strategic mindset (and here we see the limits of "Facebook revolutions"), it would have tried to extend opposition networks within the army while insisting that soldiers should not defect individually or in small groups but rather in the largest numbers possible. In the absence of leadership and strategy, soldiers and officers have begun to defect on their own in an unorganized manner. The scope of defections has expanded in the past two months and continues to expand. These defections have embarrassed the political opposition, with some criticizing the defectors for threatening to divert the uprising from its peaceful path and others greeting the defectors while calling upon them not to turn their weapons on the regime. The latter is a suicidal proposition that defecting soldiers are right to scoff at.

The strategic task of winning the Syrian soldiers over to the side of the revolution should not contradict the popular demonstrations and their non-violent nature. Here again, the Syrian case combines elements of the Egyptian and Libyan experiences, i.e. crowds of peaceful demonstrators alongside military confrontations. The non-violence of popular demonstrations was, and still is, a basic component of the movement's momentum and of its massive character, including female participation. This momentum is itself a decisive factor in inciting the soldiers to rebel against the regime.

Thus, the greatest strategic predicament in Syria is how to combine the peaceful mass mobilization with the expansion of the military opposition and the armed confrontation without which the regime's forces will never be defeated and it will never fall. That is, unless one counts on some high-ranking officers from the top of the regime's hierarchy stepping out and forcing the ruling family to flee the country to Iran. If this were to happen, Syria would end up in a position similar to the Egyptian case, where a piece fell off the top of the pyramid without it collapsing entirely.

As for direct military intervention in Syria, whether in the form of an invasion or limited to bombing from afar, it would bring the trend of defections from the Syrian army to an end and unite its ranks in a confrontation that would convince the soldiers that what the regime kept claiming since the beginning of the uprising, i.e. that it is facing a "foreign conspiracy" that wants to subjugate Syria, has been true all along. The requests made by Riyad al-Asâ€™ad, the leader of the Syrian Free Army (in the above-quoted interview), for international intervention in order to "implement a no-fly zone or no-sail zone in Syria," and create a "secure zone in northern Syria that the Syrian Free Army can administrate" are at best further evidence of the lack of strategic vision among the leadership of the Syrian uprising. They are also a product of that blend of short-sightedness and emotional reaction to the viciousness of the regime that leads some of its opponents to hope for what could lead to a major historical catastrophe in Syria and the region as a whole.

Those who wish the victory of the Syrian people's uprising for freedom and democracy in a way that makes it possible to strengthen the homeland rather than undermine it, must formulate a position of utmost clarity on these fateful issues. It is not possible to simply ignore them in the name of unity against the regime, because the fate of the struggle and indeed the entire country hangs on these very questions.

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