

From Bosnia to Syria: Is History Repeating Itself?

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Anyone closely following the ongoing crisis in Syria will notice that the desire for reforms is coming from a large part of the Syrian population which has no ties to the armed insurgency supported by foreign powers. These groups, many of them Wahhabi or Salafi terrorists, constitute a serious threat to the unity of Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Christian and Druze living together in a sovereign secular state.

In fact, reports suggest that in places where the armed insurgents have managed to gain control, the actions being carried are tantamount to “ethnic cleansing”. However, as long as those allegedly responsible are acting in a way which serves US-NATO interests, their various undertakings go unreported and media attention is strategically diverted.

(See: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=29842>)

In reality, many Syrians who are demanding reforms are not opposed to President Al Assad, and in fact believe in his commitment to implement change. Such reforms, however, require time to be carried out in the face of certain obstacles. Indeed, after decades of Baath rule, certain factions within the current regime have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo rather than having their privileges threatened by major changes brought about through reforms.

Moreover, there is also a peaceful opposition within the country that stands for change through dialogue with the government, knowing that sudden provocations could plunge the country into chaos. In an interview with “Syria Comment” from October 2011, writer Louay Hussein, an outspoken and longstanding opponent of the Syrian government, warned of further escalation:

“I believe there are two reasons why demonstrations will significantly diminish; first, the violent oppression by the authorities recently and second, the increase in the number of armed operations by groups opposed to the authorities such as ‘The Free Syrian Army’. This is why I expect more bloodshed in Syria. Moreover, I worry that if we fail to reach a homegrown settlement of the conflict very quickly, we will clearly witness different aspects of a civil war in the near future.”

(See: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=12507&cp=all>)

The mainstream media has dismissed this assessment and ignored these basic facts. Media attention has focussed on the exiled “opposition” group, the “Syrian National Council” (which is already breaking apart thanks to the domineering role of the Muslim Brotherhood) and the “Free Syrian Army”, supported covertly by the West. In addition, one of Western

media's favourite sources of information is the small, London-based organization called the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, whose claims, though unverified, have nevertheless been broadly quoted.

All this bears a striking resemblance to events leading up to last year's NATO attacks on Libya, in which tens of thousands of Libyan civilians were killed. But there are two key differences:

1. This time Russia and China have been playing a more decisive role. They have expressed their opposition to actions which might lead to aggression against Syria.
2. The so-called Libyan "rebels" had some kind of a stronghold in the city of Benghazi in the East of the country, from where NATO could bomb their way into Tripoli. Comparable conditions do not prevail in Syria.

Might this be a reason for the Syrian insurgents to increase violence by carrying out bomb attacks and provoking shootings, in order to cause severe reactions from government troops and destabilize the country, and thereby reinforce sectarian conflicts? Namely, until the situation escalates to the point that Western powers feel they can "justify" the need for intervention?

The efforts for a peaceful solution made by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan would only stand a chance if Western countries and their Saudi and Qatari allies stopped their unilateral support for anti-Assad armed insurgency.

The Lessons of History: Yugoslavia

Historically, this situation is not unique and prompts us to consider how similar events have played out in the past, particularly during the civil war in Yugoslavia in the 1990s which set a historical precedent for armed Western intervention. These tragic conflicts, especially in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, served as a playground for exercising the destabilization of an entire region, manipulating public opinion in order to start a war of aggression, and carrying out regime change and economic (and partly territorial) colonization. (See: Michael Parenti's incisive speech on the destruction of Yugoslavia: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEzOgpMWnVs>)

Given the extent to which insurgents in Syria can count on full support from the outside, some parallels to the outbreak of the Bosnian civil war (1992 – 1995) are worth emphasizing. Consider the following: during the war, the leader of the Bosnian Muslims, Alija Izetbegovic, supported covertly by the West, set as a priority the creation of an independent Bosnian state under Muslim rule. However, he had to deal with the problem that his vision did not represent the will of Bosnia's majority population: according to a 1991 census, 44% of the population considered themselves Muslim/Bosniak, 32.5% Serb and 17% Croat.

While quite accurately all of Bosnia's Serb population (one of the three constitutional nations within the republic) did not wish to leave the Yugoslav federation, the Croat side did support the holding of a referendum on an independent Bosnia. However, anyone familiar with the political aspirations of Croatia's then president Franjo Tudjman and his Bosnian Croat allies will understand that the Croatian side certainly did not favour Bosnia's independence because they wanted to live in such a state; rather, breaking Bosnia apart from Yugoslavia was supposed to be the first step in amalgamating the Bosnian territories having a Croatian

majority population within the Croatian “motherland”.

Facing these facts and knowing that civil war had already broken out in Croatia in 1991, the only reasonable way to prevent a catastrophe in Bosnia would have been through sincere negotiations on all sides. This, in fact, was the goal of the most popular Bosnian Muslim politician at the time, Fikret Abdic, who considered himself pro-Yugoslav and received the most votes in Bosnia’s 1990 elections. Nevertheless, Izetbegovic – the candidate favoured and supported by U.S. officials – seized the Bosnian presidency instead. (Incidentally, the fact that Izetbegovic had been in prison for having disturbed the order of the Yugoslav state by stating there could be “no peace or coexistence between the Islamic faith and non-Islamic social and political institutions” in a text called the “Islamic Declaration” did not seem to pose a problem to Washington.)

In March 1992, a peaceful solution for Bosnia finally seemed to be within reach. All three Bosnian leaders (Alija Izetbegovic/Muslim, Radovan Karadzic/Serb and Mate Boban/Croat) signed the so-called Lisbon Agreement, which proposed ethnic power-sharing on all administrative levels and the delegation of central government to local ethnic communities. However Izetbegovic withdrew his signature only ten days later, after having met with the U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann. It has been widely confirmed that the U.S. was pushing for an immediate recognition of Bosnia at that time. (See short clip from “Yugoslavia – An Avoidable War”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lobb8xMFRc>)

A few weeks later, war broke out, and the West was one step closer to achieving its goal of nationwide destabilization. Could the same fate be in store for Syria given the parallel involvement of the West in Syria?

In Syria as in Bosnia, efforts to find a compromise would mean putting pressure on both sides to reach an agreement. But if one side already has full support from the West, what incentive is there in pursuing a compromise with the government? In Syria, the insurgents had foreign support from the outset, automatically sabotaging the possibility of real negotiations.

Further exacerbating the situation, the mainstream media has been aggressively building the case for intervention in Syria. Several statements made by Syrian government opponents and some Western media blame the Syrian government of being responsible for the bloody terrorist bomb attacks in Damascus and Aleppo that took place on the weekend of March 17 and 18. But they were stuck for an answer regarding why it would be in President Al Assad’s interest to cause an escalation in the two largest cities of the country where he is still enjoying the support of a majority of the population.

If we go back to the Bosnian example, we can see who has historically taken advantage of such events. On May 27, 1992, a massacre took place in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, killing many innocent people waiting in line to get some bread. The terrible event was immediately and repeatedly broadcast across the world. Just four days later, on May 31, harsh UN sanctions were imposed on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. For Western decision-makers, it was clear that the Serbs were responsible for the crime. Many experts disagreed with the finger-pointing, and reference should be made particularly to Major-General Lewis MacKenzie, then Commander of the Bosnia UN troops:

“The streets had been blocked off just before the incident. Once the crowd was let in and

lined up, the media appeared but kept their distance. The attack took place, and the media were immediately on the scene. The majority of the people killed are alleged to be 'tame Serbs'." (<http://www.srpska-mreza.com/Bosnia/Sarajevo/breadline.html>)

Similar events took place in 1994 and 1995 (See for example "Yugoslavia – An Avoidable War", in its entirety: <http://video.google.de/videoplay?docid=5860186121153047571#>)

This finally caused the NATO bombing campaign against Bosnian Serbs, carried out between August 30 and September 20, 1995, as justified by Western calls for "humanitarian intervention". Following from the Damascus and Aleppo attacks, could a similar "justification" be around the corner for Syria?

A great irony, of course is the hypocritical stance taken by the U.S. government, which calls for peace on the one hand and is a leading global supplier of weapons on the other. While the Obama administration might have called on the Syrian rebels to lay down their arms, there is a vast difference between official statements and what is being carried out on the ground. Indeed, there is currently a multi-billion dollar deal underway between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia (a leading arms supplier for the Syrian rebels) for the sale of US advanced weapons. (See: <http://rt.com/news/saudi-arabia-protests-piety-514/>)

This double standard was certainly applied in Bosnia, where the CIA was secretly smuggling weapons into the area despite an arms embargo officially being in place. (See: "Wie der Dschihad nach Europa kam: Gotteskrieger und Geheimdienste auf dem Balkan" ["How Jihad Came to Europe: Holy Warriors and Secret Services in the Balkans"] by Jürgen Elsässer, 2008)

It is worth noting that in the cases of both Syria and Bosnia (among other examples), Al Qaeda-affiliated mercenaries from several Arab countries were involved. In Syria, they integrated the "opposition", heralded by the Western mainstream media as the victims of the government crackdown.

This should come as no surprise. Those who operate under the "Al Qaeda" label are often serving the interests of Washington. In Bosnia, where Mujahideen fighters trained Bosnian soldiers and fought against Serbs and Croats, the Al Qaeda leadership had to approve military actions by the Bosnian Muslim Army. (See: Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, <http://www.bim.ba/en/79/10/4113>)

One of the Bosnian Muslims who refused to fight against the Serbs, the previously mentioned Fikret Abdic, created his own safe haven by making a peace agreement with the Serbian side and by forming the "Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia", located in the area of Velika Kladusa. British diplomat David Owen described him as "forthright, confident and different from the Sarajevan Muslims. He was in favour of negotiating and compromising with Croats and Serbs to achieve a settlement, and scathing about those Muslims who wanted to block any such settlement." (David Owen, "Balkan Odyssey", 1995, S. 82)

In August 1995, under a joint attack carried out by Izetbegovic's troops and the Croatian army (both Western allies), Abdic's peaceful, autonomous province collapsed.

Often in the media, conflicts are portrayed with reference to "good guys versus bad guys", peacekeepers versus terrorists, us versus them. As this example from Bosnia shows, the full

story cannot be accurately conveyed using these stylized concepts; not all Muslims were automatically against the Serbs, and certainly not all were interested in having Izetbegovic as president.

And in Syria, it is clear that not all of those who are demanding democracy are enemies of the Al Assad government. However, delving into the “grey area” of the good/evil dichotomy puts into question the clear-cut “justification” for intervention, and casting such doubts is certainly not in the interest of the mainstream media and the Western interests they serve.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, the people on all sides suffered terribly in the Bosnian civil war. But as in Syria, it is important to establish who has an interest in triggering increased social chaos and violence.

Throughout the entire Yugoslav civil war, separatist forces served the Western agenda which consisted in destabilizing and destroying an entire country. Yugoslavia had free education, an equitable distribution of income. It preserved its independence by being a key player within the Non-aligned Movement. In turn, this historical stance by Yugoslavia served as an example for other countries of the Non-aligned Movement which refused to accept the neoliberal diktats of the IMF.

In the context of the Balkans, the Serbian people bore the brunt of the blame from the West, and were vilified largely because they firmly opposed the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Serbia was the largest Yugoslav nation and suffered heavily during World War Two, when the Croatian fascist Ustasa movement systematically slaughtered Croatia’s and Bosnia’s Serb population. It was largely this trauma that made the idea of living in the independent states of Croatia and Bosnia, both led by extremists, unbearable for most Serbs. A realistic image of Serbia’s role in the Yugoslav wars was given by then Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, in an interview made during the Kosovo war:

“We are not angels. Nor are we the devils you have made us out to be. Our regular forces are highly disciplined. The paramilitary irregular forces are a different story. Bad things happened, as they did with both sides during the Vietnam War, or any war for that matter.” (See: <http://emperors-clothes.com/articles/jared/MiloInt.html>)

All facts considered, the same could easily be said of the Syrian army and other groups fighting on Al Assad’s side. But maintaining an ambivalent position on current events in Syria, as is the trend among many mainstream liberal-leftist circles, means giving in to the neo-colonial and imperialist agenda of Western powers and their pseudo-humanitarian justification. And this despite the fact that they have actively stirred up ethnic and/or religious hatred and ignored reasonable voices, in Yugoslavia as well as in Syria, in order to follow the old Latin concept of “*divide et impera*”.

Author’s Note: According to the latest reports, Syria’s government has accepted Kofi Annan’s 6-point peace plan. On April 1, the “Friends of Syria” will be meeting in Istanbul, bringing together mostly Arab and Western countries favouring stronger action against President Bashar al-Assad’s government. Time will tell how these developments will impact the Syrian crisis and the potential effectiveness of the peace plan, knowing that so many outside players are acting in the background.

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