

Syria: Proxy War By U.S. And Gulf Monarchies

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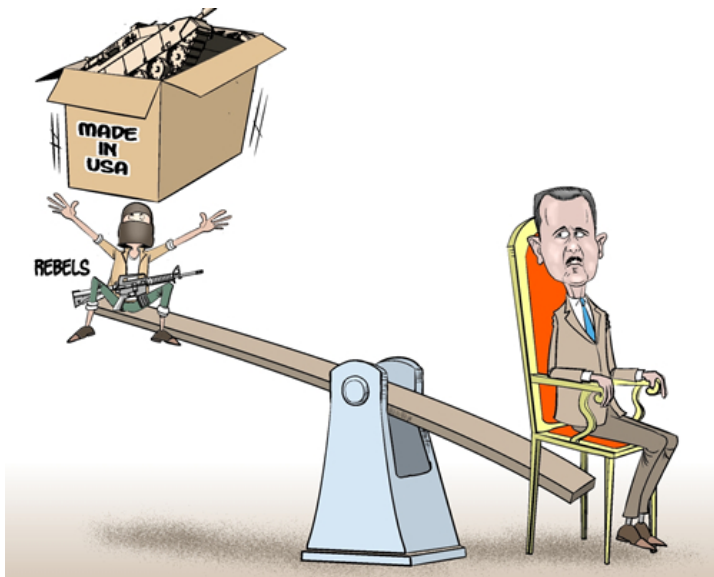
“Syria is descending into hell,” shouted three super hawks in the U.S. Senate: John McCain of Arizona, Joseph L. Lieberman of Connecticut, and Lindsey G. Graham of South Carolina. It appears that there is no war that this threesome does not like, and they are asking the Obama administration to provide weapons and lethal assistance to the opposition military command and propose Syrian no-fly zones.

The Obama administration has recognized the main opposition group, the Syrian Opposition Coalition, as the “legitimate representative” of the Syrian people. But why is it dragging its feet in providing weapons to the Syrian opposition? Probably because the situation in Syria is extremely complex.

As the Independent’s Patrick Cockburn reports, Syria is many conflicts rolled into one; the center of two regional struggles: a long-running confrontation between Sunni and Shiite factions across the Muslim world and the conflict that pits the U.S., its European allies, Israel, Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) headed by Saudi Arabia, against Iran and its friends Iraq, Alawite Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

Syria is also backed by Russia, which has given Damascus very effective, hypersonic Iskandar surface-to-surface missiles, and ground-to-air multiple target defense system Pechora 2M, that have the Pentagon worried about the effectiveness of any Syrian no-fly-zone.

A dozen Russian warships from the Northern, Baltic and Black Sea fleets are converging on the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Aden, as part of a large-scale strategic exercise. Russian intentions are obvious, even though it declares this has nothing to do with the situation in Syria.



The U.S. is deploying two Patriot missile batteries in Turkey that are manned by 400 U.S. troops on the pretext of defending Turkey, a NATO member, from Syrian Scud missiles. Analysts believe these missiles are aimed at Iran, and perhaps Russia, rather than Syria.

Inside Syria, the secular opposition backed by the West, is impotent. Even Aaron David Miller at the Wilson Center called the opposition “inchoate,” lacking even a rudimentary armed component. In his New York Times article, he called on the U.S. not to attack Syria.

The opposition’s strongest and most capable fighting force is Jabhat al-Nusra, or Solidarity Front, branded by the U.S. as a “terrorist organization” linked to al-Qaeda. There are other al-Qaeda affiliated groups fighting in Syria, and the country is sometimes called a “paradise for jihadists.” Men from Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Jordan flock to Syria to fight for an Islamic caliphate.

The jihadists work closely with the military council that commands the Free Syrian Army (FSA, largely supplied by Qatar), helping them with improvised explosive devises (IEDs) and car bombs that cause huge “collateral damage.” As a result, opposition forces are beginning to gain ground. Western media predict the imminent fall of Bashar al-Assad.

Not so fast. Government troops still have a military edge over the rebels, and they are still holding, wholly or in large part, all of Syria’s main cities and townships. The strategy seems to be a major pull back from the countryside backwaters and outlying bases, concentrating troops in cities and towns.

The Syrian tragedy is one of the worst facing the modern world. According to the UN, some 60,000 people have been killed. The West blames Assad’s government. It certainly does not hesitate to use fire power against any buildings rebels may be hiding in. But the rebels are just as ruthless.

What is the issue here? Is it democracy versus dictatorship? The Assad family has ruled Syria since 1970. But the GCC, sometimes known as geologically endowed medieval Gulf monarchies, have long suppressed democratic uprisings in their own countries.

Washington wants Basher al-Assad out to deprive Iran of a key ally. But it obviously does not want to see a balkanized Syria dominated by the jihadists. Will it go along with a post-Assad Syria ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood? The MB has already taken over Egypt, not much to

U.S. liking. It is out to topple King Abdullah II of Jordan, another U.S. client. There are really no good options for Washington.

There is a military stalemate between the government and rebels, and a military solution is not yet a viable option. The only way out is a negotiated political settlement, but that won't happen for a long time to come.

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