

SYRIA: The Houla Massacre and the Subversion of the Peace Plan

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Anyone with even an iota of conscience would condemn the Houla massacre of 25-26 May 2012. That 49 of the 108 killed were children is what makes that massacre unbearably brutal and barbaric. The government of Syria has accused armed terrorists of committing the massacre. It has provided a detailed account of what had happened. Eyewitness testimonies have been presented over state media. The armed opposition and its supporters within West Asia and in certain Western capitals have put the blame upon the Syrian government. They allege that a clandestine militia linked to the government — the shabbiha— had done most of the butchering.

There is no credible, independent entity that can help reveal the entire truth about the Houla massacre. The United Nations Human Rights Council which has passed a resolution condemning the massacre hastily targeted the Syrian government as the culprit without waiting for reports from the UN-Arab League Observer Mission in Syria. This is one of the reasons why China, Cuba and Russia voted against the resolution. The Council has since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria 14 months ago adopted an antagonistic attitude towards the government. In all its submissions to the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly, it has ignored or downplayed the views of the Syrian government.

While we hope the truth about Houla would be known soon, our most urgent challenge is to ensure that violence in Syria is brought to an end immediately. This is also the main aim of the Kofi Annan Peace Plan. All the principal perpetrators of violence — the government, the armed opposition, and what has been described as the “third force” comprising groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Salafists — must play their part. The Bashar Assad government and its armed forces should exercise maximum restraint however severe the provocation from its armed opponents. There have been a number of occasions when the State had used excessive force. Syria’s close ally, Iran, Russia and China should also be firm in warning Bashar of the danger of going beyond the limit in trying to maintain law and order. If it is true Iran is channeling military assistance to the Bashar government, it should cease to do so. By the same logic, Russia should suspend its arms sales to Damascus. At the same time, the armed opposition should lay down its arms.

A genuine movement for freedom and democracy will not resort to violence in order to achieve its goal— especially when the government has undertaken some serious reforms including the inauguration of a new Constitution, which upholds accountability, legitimizes dissent and allows for political pluralism and multi-party competition. The Constitution approved by the majority of the people through a referendum held in February 2012 also sets a two term limit on the presidency, establishes an independent judiciary, an

autonomous commission to combat corruption and recognizes media freedom. A parliamentary election was conducted in early May under the new Constitution. Western governments such as France, Britain and the United States who often parade the world stage as icons of democracy should encourage both the armed and unarmed opposition with whom they have intimate links to enter into a dialogue with the Bashar government on the implementation of the Constitution.

This is fundamental for the success of the political process that the Annan Peace Plan envisages. Instead of responding positively to some of the democratic changes introduced by the government, the US has been coordinating the supply of weapons to the opposition paid for by states such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. An article in the Washington Post (16 May 2012) reveals this, and admits that as a result of large shipments of arms, the opposition “overran a government base” and “killed 23 Syrian soldiers” on 14 May. It is significant that this intensification of weapons supply to the opposition had occurred after the ceasefire under the Peace Plan had come into effect on 12 April. In fact, there has been a series of horrifying acts of violence since the ceasefire — devastating bomb attacks in Aleppo and Damascus some associated with Al-Qaeda and Salafist elements— aimed at creating chaos and anarchy. They offer incontrovertible proof that certain governments in the West and in West Asia do not want the Peace Plan to succeed.

Why are they hell-bent on wrecking the Peace Plan? They fear that if the Plan works, it would undermine their agenda, which is regime change in Damascus. It is because these and certain other governments are set on regime change that the earlier Arab League Observer Mission to Syria which exposed the lies fabricated by the opposition about so-called government initiated violence was also sabotaged. For the proponents of regime change, the government has to be tarred and tarnished with whatever violence that occurs as a way of destroying its legitimacy and convincing both domestic and international public opinion that it should be ousted.

If there is so much obsession with regime change it is because it serves the interests of different actors in different ways. For Paris, London and Washington, the Bashar government is that critical conduit that connects Iran to the Hezbollah in their common opposition to Western dominance of the world’s most important geo-economic and geo-strategic region. This triumvirate of resistance to Western hegemony has to be broken for yet reason: to enhance the so-called security of its surrogate in West Asia, namely, Israel. Israel in turn is implacably hostile to Bashar Assad mainly because he continues to oppose Israel’s 45 year-old occupation of Syria’s Golan Heights, which incidentally supplies one-third of Israel’s water needs. Israel has also been trying to exploit Golan’s oil and gas reserves.

The Saudi and Qatari elite, both Sunni, view Bashar as a Shia (Allawites being a branch of the Shia sect) leader allied to Shia Iran and since the Saudi elite in particular abhors Shia identity and Iran’s growing power, there is no love lost between them. Besides, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are intimately linked to the US and its other allies. Turkey is yet another Washington ally and NATO member, attempting to spread its influence in the region which now realises that an anti-hegemony neighbour like Bashar’s Syria linked to a formidable regional player like Iran can be a major obstacle to its ambition.

What these regime change proponents who are all part of the Western hegemonic agenda are not prepared to acknowledge is that any attempt to oust Bashar Assad through external interference and military intervention will have horrendous consequences for almost every

state in West Asia and beyond. Syria itself will plunge into a long and bloody civil war for Bashar retains the support of the majority of his people especially in the populous cities of Damascus and Aleppo. It is significant that unlike the coterie around Gaddafi not a single major figure in government or the ruling party or the military or the diplomatic corps has deserted him in spite of a concerted 14-month push to dislodge him from power. Lebanon, a country with a deep umbilical cord to Syria— always a tinderbox of inter-sectarian strife— is already witnessing deadly clashes between pro and anti- Bashar supporters.

If Lebanon is in turmoil, it will almost certainly have repercussions for Israel especially since the latter is perceived as one of the root causes of the conflict in Syria. Jordan is another neighbour with extensive people-to-people relations with Syria that will not be able to insulate itself from a chaotic Syria. Then there are a number of states in the Arab world in which the Shia are either the majority or the minority and a conflict which assumes a sectarian character is bound to impact upon them. In the former category are countries such as Iraq and Bahrain while in the latter category would be Saudi Arabia and Kuwait among others. Iran and Turkey as regional actors who are already involved directly or indirectly in the Syrian crisis will also feel the effects of a worsening situation. So would Russia and China and Western powers such as France, Britain and the US. This is why Kofi Annan has a monumental challenge before him. It is not enough to ask Bashar Assad to do more to curb violence. Appealing to armed groups to abide by the ceasefire of April 12 is only part of the solution. Annan should have the courage to demand that the Western powers and various regional players cease to aid and abet groups that resort to violence in Syria. He should tell them in no uncertain terms that external political actors have no right to seek a regime change in Damascus. That is the prerogative of the people of Syria— a prerogative that they should exercise through peaceful means.

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