

# The Limelight Defeat of America's "Assad Must Go" Policy

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*As the events of war in Syria have emphatically shown, the self-styled Islamic State and the US-supported "moderate" jihadi groups have been defeated, and with it has died down the cornerstone of America's direct and indirect military intervention i.e., "Assad must go" in Syria. This is evident not only from the way the Syrian army, supported by its Iranian and Russian allies, has rolled back the destroyers of Syria, but also how Assad has started to re-assert his standing as a legitimate ruler of Syria, representing Syria's interests in major international forums and setting rules of engagement with regard to discussing Syria's future and the role other countries can play in it.*

This assertion came to full limelight in a recent speech that Assad made in the second half of the month of August and outlined his vision for Syria's post-war reconstruction. Of particular importance were his words with regard to the role some foreign powers have been playing in Syria since the beginning of the so-called "civil war" as he said that he expects those foreign powers, the US and its Arab allies, who have pushed a regime change agenda – an agenda that has caused a lot of destruction and yet failed spectacularly – to abandon their residual links with rebel groups. Until this is done, Assad said further,

"there will be neither security cooperation, nor the opening of embassies."

Clearly, Assad is setting his terms of engagement with the powers that have sought to oust him in the last five years or so. What is equally evident here is the way Assad himself has set his own position as the ruler at the helm of Syrian affairs, intending to extend his control on the whole of Syria and deciding both its domestic and foreign policies. As such, while Assad was explicit in chiding some foreign powers for their role in Syria, he was equally explicit in setting his country's future foreign policy orientation towards "the East." He said, the

"strategic future of Syria must be towards the East."

Assad's speech coincided with the defeat of one of the most powerful "rebel groups" in Syria, Ahrar-al-Sham. Not only was this group one of the West's "moderate elements" but also played an instrumental role in a number of "rebel" victories against government troops during the years 2013-2015. Many in the West pinned high hopes on it, seeing it as a potential player in the future of Syria, especially after its troops joined in the fight against the IS and also agreed to support a political endgame to the Syrian conflict. Its defeat has, as such, turned out to be the last nail in the coffin of America's "Assad must go" policy. With

Ahrar's fighters now fleeing and joining other group and with Syrian and Russian elements controlling Syria's geo-political terrain, the West is left with minimum options to enliven the war through some other groups. Therefore, it is not surprising to see some influential policy makers in the US coming to terms with a Syria under Assad's control.

"Bashar Assad's government has won the war militarily," said Robert Ford, a former US ambassador to Damascus, who is said to have played an instrumental role in fomenting the crisis in Syria back in 2011-12, adding further that

"I can't see any prospect of the Syrian opposition being able to compel him to make dramatic concessions in a peace negotiation."

And while raw material i.e., human element to sustain these groups exit, sources of support for them have dried. The Syrian "rebels" have been frustrated by the way Europe, for instance, has become more interested in stanching the flow of Syrian refugees and stabilizing the country enough to send many of those already in Europe back. Continuation of war, therefore, doesn't suit Europe.

Persian Gulf is squabbling, and due to that internal rift, flow of support to previously supported groups has shrunk dramatically, adding to the opposition group's sense of frustration. Therefore, the directions they're now receiving are markedly different from that of past 2 years.

"The nations who supported us the most ... they're all shifting their position," told Osama Abu Zaid, an opposition spokesman, to an American newspaper. "We're being pressured from all sides to draw up a more realistic vision, to accept Assad staying."

While the US has established a number of military establishments in Kurdish dominated northern parts of Syria, indicating its intentions to prolong its stay in Syria, the speed of the Syrian forces' recovery of the lost ground and the fact that regional powers, Turkey and Iran, have joined hands to prevent the establishment of Kurdistan show that the US plan is increasingly looking like a pipe dream. The US, realistically speaking, apparently has no source on the ground to sustain itself or influence the final outcome. With direct military intervention out of the question, it is much more than even an uphill task of cobbling together a fresh "rebel force" to be able to challenge the combined forces of Syria and Iran backed militias, including Hezbollah, in the southern and eastern regions of Syria.

What is adding more problems is the fact that the US-backed groups and the US-led coalition have miserably failed to give a positive message to the masses they are supposedly protecting against a "brutal" regime. The so-called "unfortunate" incidents of civilian deaths at the hands of these forces are furthering the distance between these groups and the people who might have supported them in the past. In a latest incident of this nature, the US led coalition fighting the IS militants said on last Friday that its strike had caused at least 61 civilian deaths. Much for the erosion of "popular support" these forces and powers claimed to have in the country!

All in all, it is clear that the ground has been cleared of any possibility of Assad's exit from Syria. The only hope left for the US to realize its erstwhile agenda is through massive

mobilization of Kurdish forces. However, were this to happen, the US would end up unwittingly cementing the Turkish-Iranian and Syrian alliance further and increase the likelihood that the Iranian militias and Assad's forces, duly supported by Turkey, would start an offensive against the Kurds. In such a scenario, the Americans won't use troops to defend the Syrian Kurds. There is no appetite for this among the American public, and the Syrian Kurds would be making a terrible mistake thinking the US will come and save them.

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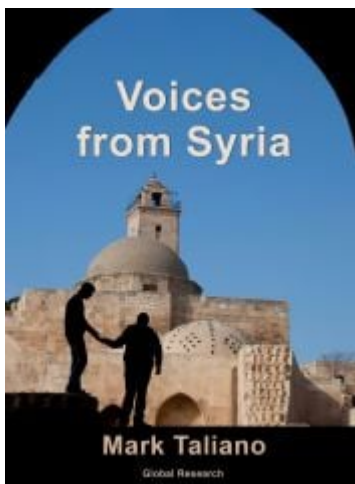
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