

# The War on Syria has Taken a U-turn: Assad Is There to Stay

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*Long gone the days when the U.S.-led so-called “Friends of Syria” could plausibly claim that two thirds of Syria was controlled by rebel forces, that Syrian capital Damascus was under siege and its fall was just a matter of time and that the days of President Bashar al-Assad were numbered and accordingly he “should step down.”*

The war on Syria has taken a U-turn during the past year. Assad now firmly holds the military initiative. The long awaited foreign military intervention could not take off; it was prevented by the emerging multi-polar world order. Syrian and non-Syrian insurgents are now on the run. Assad stands there to stay.

The thinly veiled UN legitimacy, which was used to justify the invasions of Iraq and Libya under the pretexts of the responsibility to protect on humanitarian grounds, failed to impose no-fly zones, humanitarian corridors and other instruments of foreign intervention; they foundered on the borders of Syrian national sovereignty.

The official Syrian Arab Army (SAA), which was strategically organized and stationed to fight a regular war in defence against the Israeli occupying power in the western south of the country, was taken by surprise by an internationally and regionally coordinated unconventional attack on its soft civilian backyard where it had zero presence.

Within a relatively short period of time the SAA succeeded in containing the initial attack, in adapting trained units to unconventional guerrilla war in cities and in winning over the support of the civilian population, without acceding any ground of its defence vis-à-vis Israel

Ever since, the SAA was gaining more ground, liberating more civilian centers from insurgent terrorists, closing more border crossing points used for infiltration of foreign fighters into the country, cutting of their supply lines and besieging pockets of their presence in inner old cities and in their isolated concentrations in the countryside. The capital Damascus , more than 95% of the common borders with Lebanon and the central heart of Syria around Homs are now secured. Except the northern city of Raqqa , no where in Syria the insurgents can claim exclusive control. The SAA is winning all its battles.

The declared goal now of the U.S., Saudi, Qatari and Turkish financial, military and logistical support for the insurgents is no more the “regime change,” but creating a balance of power aimed at improving their standing in future negotiations with the regime. To do so, they claim they are extending their support to what they describe as the “moderate” insurgents.

However, “moderate” rebels are a rare species in Syrian insurgency. Entering its fourth

year now, the war on Syria has created a highly polarized war zone that has left no room for any moderates. Combatants are fighting now to death in a battle of life or death.

The fighting lines are strictly drawn between homeland defence and foreign intervention, between national forces and international terrorists and between an existing secular and civil state and a future state perceived to be governed by an extremist or, at the best, a moderate version of Islamist ideology supported by the most backward, tribal and undemocratic regional states with similar sectarian ideologies.

During his testimony at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on last September 3, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry denied that the “moderate” Syrian rebels are infiltrated by the al-Qaeda terrorists as “basically not true.”

The Syrian “opposition has increasingly become more defined by its moderation, more defined by the breadth of its membership, and more defined by its adherence to some, you know, democratic process and to an all-inclusive, minority protecting constitution, which will be broad-based and secular with respect to the future of Syria,” Kerry testified.

However, hard facts on the ground in Syria as well as statements by other U.S. high ranking officials challenge Kerry’s testimony as a politically motivated, far from truth and misleading statement.

Last March, General David Rodriguez, head of the U.S. Africa Command, testified before the House Armed Services Committee that “ Syria has become a significant location for al-Qaeda-aligned groups to recruit, train, and equip extremists.”

The previous month, James Clapper, the U.S. director of national intelligence, called Syria a “huge magnet” for Islamic extremists in testimony prepared for the Senate intelligence committee.

Last January, Clapper also told a Senate intelligence hearing that “training complexes” for foreign fighters were spotted in Syria and chair of the Senate intelligence committee Dianne Feinstein described Syria as “the most notable new security threat in the year” since the committee’s last meeting.

Matthew Olsen, director of the U.S. government’s National Counterterrorism Center , was on record to say that “ Syria has become really the predominant jihadist battlefield in the world.”

Also on record was Jeh C. Johnson, Secretary of Homeland Security, who stated that the Syria war “has become a matter of homeland security,” former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell who identified Syria as “the greatest threat to U.S. national security,” FBI Director until last September Robert Mueller who “warned that an increasing flow of U.S. citizens heading to Syria and elsewhere to wage jihad against regional powers could end up in a new generation of home-grown terrorists.”

All these and other high level U.S. conclusions do not testify to the existence of “moderate” insurgents in Syria and vindicate the official Syrian narration as much as they refute Kerry’s statement about the “democratic,” “secular” and “moderate” Syrian “opposition.”

“Moderate” rebels are either marginal or a rare species in Syrian insurgency and if they do

exist they are already increasingly concluding “reconciliation” agreements with the Syrian government, according to which they disarm, join the government anti terror and anti “strangers” military and security campaign or simply recurring to attending to their personal lives.

The Americans and their Saudi and Turkish bullies are left with the only option of artificially creating artificial “moderates,” whom they unrealistically and wishfully dream of turning into a credible leading force on the ground.

As part of his efforts to mend fences with Saudi Arabia , a persistent advocate of war and militarization in Syria , U.S. President Barak Obama seems to have pursued recently a two-pronged diplomatic and military policy.

Diplomatically, he closed the Syrian embassy and consulates in the United States and restricted the movement of the Syrian envoy to the United Nations as a “down payment” ahead of his visit to the kingdom on last March 28.

Militarily, he promised more arms to Syrian “moderate” rebels during his visit. After the visit he was reportedly considering arming those “moderate” rebels with more advanced weaponry, including anti-aircraft missiles or MANPADs.

While providing those “moderates” with MANPADs is yet to be confirmed, Israel’s Debkafile website on this April 7 reported that two moderate Syrian rebel militias – the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Revolutionary Front – have been supplied with advanced US weapons, including armour-piercing, optically-guided BGM-71 TOW missiles, which enter the Middle East for the first time. Images of rebels equipped with these arms have begun to circulate in recent days. Both militias are coordinating and cooperating with the al-Qaeda offshoot the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, both listed as terrorist groups by the U.S. , Saudi Arabia Syria and Iraq .

#### About Time for U.S. to Reconsider

Within this context, the existing CIA-led program in Jordan for training pre-approved “moderates” will reportedly be expanded to raise the number of trainees from one hundred to six hundred a month.

At this rate, according to Charles Lister, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Center in Qatar, writing on this April 3, “it would take close to two years to produce a force” that could numerically rival the extremist “Ahrar al-Sham” group and “it would take seven years” to create a force that could rival the extremist “Islamic Front,” let alone the mainstream groups of terrorist insurgents like the ISIS and the al-Nusra.

Going ahead with such a U.S.-Saudi training program in Jordan is tantamount to planning an extended war on Syria until such time that the regime changes or the country becomes a failed state, as the planners wishfully hope.

Moderate Syrian rebels are a U.S. mirage. With logistical vital help from Turkey , the Saudi and Qatari U.S. allies were determined to successfully militarize and hijack legitimate popular protests for change lest they sweep along their own people and spill over into their own territories.

It’s about time that the U.S. policy makers reconsider, deal with the facts on the ground in

Syria and stop yielding to the bullying of their regional allies who continue to beat the drums of war only to survive the regional tidal wave of change.

To contain this tidal wave of change, Qatar , Saudi Arabia and Turkey have sponsored an Islamist alternative as a counterrevolution. The Muslim Brotherhood International (MBI) was a version of this alternative. Unfortunately the U.S. got along with it. The MBI plan in Egypt has proved counterproductive. Its failure in Egypt pre-empted for good any hope for its success in Syria . The ensuing rift among the anti-Syria allies doomed the plan regionally.

President Assad’s statement on this April 7 that the “project of political Islam” has failed was not overoptimistic or premature. Neither was the statement of his ally, the leader of Lebanon ’s Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, on the same day that “the phase of bringing down the regime or bringing down the (Syrian) state is over... They cannot overthrow the regime, but they can wage a war of attrition.”

The U.S. campaign for more than three years now for a “regime change” in Syria has created only a “huge magnet” for international terrorism, thanks to Saudi, Qatari and Turkish military, financial and logistical support.

Peaceful protesters were sidelined to oblivion. More than three years of bloodshed left no room for moderates. “Regime change” by force from outside the country, along the Iraqi and Libyan lines, has proved a failure. U.S. and western calls for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down is now a faint cry that can hardly be heard.

All world and regional indications as well as military developments on the ground refer to one fact: Assad is there to stay. Change will come only under his leadership or his guidance. Understanding with him is the only way to internal and regional stability. More or less he has succeeded in turning the “huge magnet” for international terrorists into their killing field. His final victory is only a matter of time. Arming rebels, “moderates” or terrorists regardless, will only perpetuate the Syrian people’s plight and fuel regional anti-Americanism.

The sooner the United States act on this fact is the better for all involved parties.

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