



Apocalyptic Musings about Syria

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August 2012

Executive Summary

- * The Islamists-Jihadists and their foreign sponsors have become both the dominant and most destructive element in the Syrian crisis. The Jihadist ascent – as manifested in their ability to deliver spectacular operations at the heart of the regime – and the prevailing conviction that the Assad administration is profoundly changing due to self-devouring or just confronting reality reflect the profound change in the war in Syria.
- * The key supporting powers – the United States, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – started to up-grade the overall military and political capabilities of the Syrian Islamist-Jihadist opposition. The primary objectives of the Adana facility are to formulate and coordinate the overall strategy of the Syrian opposition, as well as direct training and organization of the opposition forces, and military and communications supplies to these forces.
- * The battle for Damascus was the first major undertaking of the Adana “nerve center”. Absent popular support and legitimacy, the predominantly-Jihadist opposition forces had to leave Damascus altogether. The population remained steadfastly loyal to the Assad administration.
- * The ongoing battle for Aleppo is turning out to be a very important milestone. The fighting between the Syrian security forces and the predominantly-Jihadist opposition forces take place in the shadow of a major Turkish military build-up on the nearby border that compels Syria to deploy huge forces rather than fight in Aleppo. The Jihadists lack popular support and the bulk of their forces infiltrated from Turkey. The Syrian security forces succeed in containing and defeating the revolt in Aleppo without causing extensive collateral casualties and damage.
- * Strategically, the Assad administration won the war already in fall 2011. The traditional key to ruling Syria is an alliance between the security and economic elites – and Assad’s Damascus has already succeeded to restore and sustain this alliance.
- * The main engine of violence is the flow of Syrian and foreign Jihadists, weapons and funds from Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. These Jihadists increase the pace of politically embarrassing strikes at the centers of Damascus, Aleppo and other cities to the detriment of the civilian population that suffers the brunt of the security forces’ reaction.
- * The escalation of violence in Syria is being exploited by the US and its allies – mainly France, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – as the justification for furthering their own assertive interventionist policy in support of the Islamists-Jihadists. The US and allies hope to capitalize on the Jihadist-provoked humanitarian tragedy as the justification for a Western military intervention in Syria that will, in turn, empower the Islamists-Jihadists in Damascus just as the US-led West did for the Islamists-Jihadists in Tripoli, Libya. That the Syrian people will pay the ultimate price for these cynical machinations matters to none.



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ANALYSIS

The bomb that went off on the morning of July 18 in the National Security Building in Rawda, Damascus, symbolizes in more than one way the current state of the fratricidal carnage called war in Syria. The blast killed Defense Minister Daoud Rajha, the highest ranking Christian in the regime; Assaf Shawkat, the president's brother-in-law and deputy commander of the military; Hassan Turkmani, military adviser to the foreign minister; and Hisham Ikhtiyar, the national security chief. The first two died immediately and the other two would die from their wounds within days. Altogether about ten officials were killed and over fifty were wounded.

The bomb was brought in by a Sunni bodyguard staunchly loyal to the regime. However, a local Jihadist cell reached his rural extended family, threatened to kill them all and thus coerced him to cooperate. This modus operandi befits of the Jihadist umbrella group al-Liwa al-Islam that claimed the bombing. According to Syrian Intelligence, the bomb was a very sophisticated mini-bomb concealed in an electronic device brought into the building by one of the bodyguards of an attending VIP. The bomb was activated by remote control at the most opportune moment. According to the forensic analysis by the experts of Syrian Intelligence, such a bomb can only be manufactured by the intelligence services of the US, the UK and Israel.

Careful analysis of the video-taped claim of the bombing by the Jihadist group al-Haq confirms the main analysis of Syrian Intelligence. (That al-Haq is in all likelihood a bogus entity created solely for claiming the bombing is irrelevant. The graphics and Koranic verses on the icon in the top left-hand corner of the video clearly identify the Jihadist trend to which al-Haq, and for that matter al-Liwa al-Islam, belong. The same apply to both the Islamist chant accompanying the blast and the Jihadist sermon at the end of the clip.) The camera was perfectly positioned and its lense focused well in advance on a rooftop about one kilometer away from the National Security Building in Rawda. "The people who filmed that footage knew in advance. They set up the camera, arranged the focus," explained Professor Mordechai Kedar (a retired Israeli Military Intelligence colonel). "They were part of the cell of attackers and not just up on a rooftop by chance."

Significantly, key segments of the Arab elites refused to accept the Jihadist responsibility and instead blamed the bombing on a conspiracy inside the regime. The interpretation by a very senior Jordanian intelligence official is telling. The bombing in Damascus was the handiwork of Bashar al-Assad himself and a few Allawites very close to him. Bashar has learned that Former Syrian Defense Minister General Hassan Ali Turkmani and Defense Minister Daoud Rajha were leading a conspiracy against the Allawite elite. Their plan was to have a Sunni-dominated military coup and then invite the opposition to the negotiations table. They also made contact with Jordanian and Turkish intelligence. Bashar has known about the conspiracy for quite some time but resolved not to do anything drastic in order not to break apart the leadership in Damascus and the war effort. However, a few days before the bombing Bashar had been informed that Assaf Shawkat began talking to the conspirators about a way out for himself and a few Allawites close to him. Bashar could not afford such treason in the family – and had the next meeting of the conspirators blown up.

Ultimately, taken together, both the ascent of the Jihadist forces – as manifested in their ability to deliver such a spectacular operation at the heart of the regime – and the prevailing conviction that the Assad administration is profoundly changing due to self-devouring or just confronting reality reflect the profound change in the war in Syria.

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By the time of the mid-July bombing both sides were already actively preparing for the next phase in the war and escalation.

Back in early July, the Assad administration started the reorganization of the security forces into smaller, more flexible “fighting-fists” units under the command of younger Allawite commanders (mainly members of the Special Forces, the Security Services, and the Shabiha militia) who excelled in the clashes with the opposition. As well, new Mukhabarat units were organized to purge the military of defeatist and defecting elements. The Assad innermost circle concluded that the conventional High Command was exhausted by more than a year of war and thus needed rejuvenation. Hence, most senior officers in Damascus were sent to extended rest and leave with full pay and privilege.

These organizational changes led to the adoption of new ruthless tactics aimed to quickly storm, overwhelm and completely destroy pockets of resistance by the flexible “fighting-fists” units. The declared objective was to put an end to challenges – particularly in western Syria and then in the other border areas – rather than permit the continuation of the prevailing situation of lingering besieging of urban pockets of resistance. Toward this end, the new “fighting-fists” units were to be provided with heavy weaponry not yet used in the war including heavy artillery, rockets, and, should the need arise, combat helicopters and fighter-bombers. The commanders were given the “unlimited permission [to use] whatever means necessary for smashing pockets of resistance.”

The July 18 bombing thus provided Bashar al-Assad with golden opportunity to revamp the High Command as if coping with the casualties rather than acknowledging a purge. On July 21, he convened in the Qassioun Compound near Damascus the new team for conducting the war on the opposition. Bashar was described as being in a defiant, combative and vindictive mood. He told the senior officers he was adamant on exerting very painful revenge on the opposition. Bashar nominated his brother Maher the commander of the new military effort. Other key members of the inner-circle team are General Ali Mamluk (Chief of General Intelligence), General Hafez Makhluף (Rami’s brother, former chief of internal intelligence and now super-governor of the greater Damascus), and General Ali Hassan (the “supervisor” of the Shabiha militias).

The new team was empowered with greater extra-judicial powers than before. However, as the mop-up of the fighting in Damascus under Hafez Makhluף has demonstrated, the new team knows how to be judicious and prudent with the use of power. In principle, the upper-most leadership in Damascus is calm and self-confident.

Two other members of the Assad military elite are the new Defense Minister General Fahad Jassim al-Frej and the new Chief of General Staff of the Army and the Armed Forces General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub. Significantly, Frej was the Chief of Staff. In that capacity, he was in charge of the anti-invasion issues, the latest military exercises in cooperation with Iran, weapon acquisition from Russia, etc. He has not been involved in the conduct of the war. This focus is most important given the face-off with Turkey and the growing threat of US-led intervention. General Ayyoub was Frej’s Deputy. In that capacity he was indirectly involved in the fighting – mainly in the sustenance, control and training of the Syrian Armed Forces. The enduring cohesion, continued fighting capabilities, and low rates of desertion and defection testify to Ayyoub’s success. The escalating crisis and war will put his skills to the test.

Meanwhile, the key supporting powers – the United States, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – started to upgrade the overall military and political capabilities of the Syrian opposition. In the first half of July, Turkish intelligence established a secret facility in Adana, about 60 miles from the Syrian border and close to the US-NATO



airbase in Incirlik, to serve as a “nerve center” for the joint effort “to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.” The facility is under the command of a Turkish senior intelligence official and staffed primarily by military and intelligence officials from Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. While US intelligence is formally not a part of the Adana “nerve center” – Incirlik-based US officials closely and frequently visit and closely cooperate with the Adana facility. Turkish and Qatari senior intelligence officials expect the US involvement to markedly increase given the mandate and latitude given to the US Intelligence Community by the Finding recently signed by President Obama.

The primary objectives of the Adana facility are to formulate and coordinate the overall strategy of the Syrian opposition, as well as direct training and organization of the opposition forces, and military and communications supplies to the opposition forces. In mid-July, Turkey and Qatar launched a major training effort for the Islamist-Jihadist forces – both Syrian and foreign – by several expert teams that include Turkish and Qatari Special Forces officers and NCOs, as well as contracted European (mainly British and American) former Special Forces. Although most weapons supplies are funded by Qatar and increasingly Saudi Arabia, the US CIA is playing an increasing role in the actual acquisition of the weapons and their safe delivery to southern Turkey airbases – from where they are distributed by Turkish military intelligence and controlled in the field by Qatar-sponsored Jihadist “foreign legion” teams. The Islamist-Jihadist forces – both Syrian and foreign – are virtually the sole recipients of the new flow of arms and funds. The Adana “nerve center” directs and supervises major initiatives of the Syrian opposition such as the late-July “offensives” in Damascus and Aleppo. The media and communications arm of the “nerve center” also helps the Free Syrian Army (FSA) claim responsibility for events inside Syria and shape the coverage of the Syrian crisis in Western media.

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The battle for Damascus was the first major undertaking of the Adana “nerve center”.

In mid-July, Turkish and Qatari intelligence sought to unleash a spectacular operation in Damascus in order to focus Western attention on the need to intervene and force a favorable resolution at the UNSC. As usual, the operation would be claimed by the FSA. On July 12, the SNC’s Bashar al-Haraki announced in Istanbul that the decisive battle for Damascus was fast approaching. “The FSA has been preparing for this battle for some time now, and the best example of this can be seen in the military operations that have taken place in the capital, in addition to the FSA’s presence in Damascus and the surrounding areas,” al-Haraki said.

On July 13, FSA commander Col. Riad al-Asaad met with select Arab journalists in Turkey and announced that “preparations for the battle of Damascus are underway and are in full swing, particularly as this operation – which will be the final and decisive confrontation with the regime – requires special preparations and arrangements. ... This has led to the battle being postponed so far; however once it starts it will be resolved quickly, within a matter of weeks.” Col. al-Asaad stressed that “the presidential palace will not decide the battle, rather what is important is capturing the military units that surround the palace, including the Fourth Armored Division and the Republican Guards.” He predicted that “initiating the battle in Damascus will have a positive impact on the pace of defections from the al-Assad regime, particularly amongst its leadership, after everybody becomes aware that the regime is facing its end.”

The regime took these warnings seriously and prepared for what a very senior officials called “the last battle for Damascus.” On 15 July, the Syrian General Staff relocated the command staff handling the war and pertinent



crises to a well-fortified complex on Shuhada Street in the center of Damascus. The compound is popularly known as the “Summer Command” and is under the building complex formally housing the supply/logistics division/department (the Arabic term does not fit Western terms) of the Syrian Armed Forces. On July 16, several small groups of tanks and armored vehicles of the 3rd Tank Division (initially a predominantly Allawite unit that until summer 2011 had been deployed on the border with Israel) were positioned throughout the center of Damascus and around government buildings. However, these forces took no action.

Meanwhile, the FSA bluster coming over the Arab satellite TV news had dramatic impact on the population in the blue collar neighborhoods, suburbs and slums in northern, western and southern Damascus – particularly the Muadamiyah, Kharasta and al-Kadam districts. Expecting liberation forces to be arriving imminently – the population erupted in a genuine popular revolt over the weekend. Symbols of the regime such as police stations and government buildings were attacked and torched. Weapon storage sites were raided. Individuals known to, or suspected of, being Mukhabarat were lynched. Stunned by the intensity of the violence and hatred – the security forces did nothing to quell the fratricidal violence. Armored cells – mainly with BMPs – blocked the main roads leading out of the neighborhoods. With no liberation forces arriving, the spontaneous eruption started to die down on July 17. Syrian artillery kept pounding the remaining pockets of resistance in Muadamiyah and Kharasta for the next couple of days.

The various leaders of the opposition and their foreign sponsors were also caught off guard by the grassroots eruption. Consequently, opposition cells, comprised mostly of defectors and local cadres hiding with their clans and extended families in the main districts of southern Damascus, rose up as well. Some opposition networks, mainly Islamist-Jihadist cells, were activated by outside leaders in order not to miss out on the eruption. At first, the various opposition groups attempted to take the war into the heart of official Damascus – blowing up a few car bombs and firing small arms and RPG’s at official buildings. However, the security forces reacted with fury. Overnight, increasingly assertive patrols of Special Forces succeeded in hunting down opposition teams attempting to reach the city center. Meanwhile, armored forces were rushed to blocking the main roads leading from the districts.

Starting the morning of July 16, the Islamist-Jihadist forces transformed the character of the fighting. Fighting now concentrated in the southern districts of Meidan and Tadmon. There are about half-a-million inhabitants in these districts, most of whom are Sunnis. A large portion of the young males serve in the military and other security services or work for the government. Fearing fratricidal violence, the Syrian security forces initially withdrew to the edges of the districts – leaving the Islamist-Jihadist forces in de-facto control of both districts. On July 17, the Syrian Armed Forces – mainly elements assigned to the 3rd Tank Division – deployed around the districts six Fuji (reinforced battalions) of mechanized infantry equipped with BMPs and BTRs but did not have tanks. However, the Islamist-Jihadist forces kept attacking the security forces from within the densely populated neighborhoods in hope of provoking heavy fire on the civilians – that is, Sunnis who are still largely loyal to the Assad administration. The security forces started shooting at select opposition targets, while helicopters hovered above. In principle, the Syrian army was doing its utmost not to be dragged into returning heavy fire onto Meidan and Tadmon.

However, there emerged a wildcard in the general area of Meidan and Tadmon. A few Fuji of the Shabiha militia showed up in the morning of July 17. Their commanders insisted that they had a mission to save and assist the Allawite population living in the two districts. The Shabiha were trying to cross the army’s roadblocks in



order to enter the districts but senior army officers finally convinced them to wait outside. Had the Shabiha started carnage – they would have played into the hands of the Islamist-Jihadist forces and their foreign sponsors.

Meanwhile, by mid-day July 16, Palestinian Islamist-Jihadist forces rose up in the two Damascus-area refugee camps – Yarmuk and Hama. About 130,000 Palestinians are living in these camps. The Palestinian gangs attacked local Syrian police and security forces buildings and attempted to reach the general area of Meidan and Tadmon. Here, the Syrian army reacted with the usual fury- unleashing ruthless artillery firepower and tank assaults into the densely populated camps. By mid-day July 17, two regiment-level tank columns drove into Yarmuk and Hama – destroying by direct fire anything that stood in their way. Heavy artillery keeps shelling the rest of the camps relentlessly.

Meanwhile, Iranian IRGC and Lebanese HizbAllah hit teams started running amok in central Damascus and settling scores with friends and foes alike.

Adding to the chaos and fright were armored convoys with vehicles rumored to be carrying shells and war-heads filled with chemical weapons for use against the population. These convoys were speeding through the main streets of Damascus – terrifying everybody about the possible escalation ahead.

Confusion reigned on the night of 17/18 July. There were numerous reports of renewed bombing and ambushes by opposition forces of unknown size and affiliation on the edges of Meidan and Tadmon, as well as in the neighborhoods of Kafar Susa, Nahar Aishah, Bakdam and Kabun. Artillery and tank shelling and helicopter strikes were reported all over the greater Damascus area. In central Damascus, there were clashes in the Seven Pools area – mainly around Baghdad Street and the Central Bank – as Jihadist teams that tried to deliver and place car-bombs were being hunted down by Special Forces and Mukhabarat teams. Several explosions took place as cars were either detonated by cornered Jihadists or by security forces in the area.

The overall fighting all but subsided during morning of July 18. The main opposition activities took place in relation to the overnight (17/18 July) escape of the main Jihadist groups from Meidan to Nahar Aishah and then to Kabun – a swing to the east and then to the north. During the night, the Jihadist forces attempted to attack with RPGs a local garrison currently used by elements of the 4th Division. In response, a few tanks fired at adjacent houses in the Kabun neighborhood from where the Jihadists fired. The Syrian armed forces also fired mortar shells and flares at a nearby ridge for fear opposition fighters were firing on them from there. Several of these flares fell on the ridge and set it aflame – a spectacular fire which the opposition used in video claiming they hit a major garrison. Skirmishes between tanks and BMPs and a few hardcore Jihadist holdouts continued till mid-day.

By mid-day July 18, after the news of the bombing in the National Security Building in Rawda spread – Sunni crowds started celebrating in the streets in downtown Damascus. They also offered everybody sweets as is the tradition for extremely joyous events. Significantly, in several checkpoints Sunni soldiers climbed down from their tanks, BMPs and BTRs and joined the celebrating crowds. All of these troops belong to the elite 3rd Tank Division. While many soldiers joined the celebration – most of them returned to their posts after enjoying the sweets.

By July 19, the battle for Damascus was effectively over. The opposition failed in a major way. The FSA's claims in Istanbul that "the Damascus volcano has erupted" and that "the final battle has begun" were grossly exag-



gerated. The widespread fighting in Damascus was clearly an embarrassment for the Assad administration. However, on their own, the opposition forces could not topple the Assad regime. Nor could they sustain operations and provocations when the bulk of the population refused to join them. Little wonder that Bashar al-Assad and his inner-circle were emboldened and determined to go on the offensive in order to capitalize on the momentum. Bashar al-Assad was back in Damascus – albeit in the fortified Mt Qassioun compound rather than the downtown Presidential Palace. The Assad administration has full command and control capabilities from the compound. Hence, this relocation would not affect the conduct of the war.

The fighting in Damascus in the next couple of days – 19 - 20 July – were largely mop-up operations. On July 19, the bulk of the fighting was in the outlying suburbs adjacent to the all-important Meidan neighborhood – mainly Nahar Aishah, Kafar Susa, and to a lesser extent Kabun. The armed forces relied mainly on tanks and BMPs of the 3rd Tank Division operating in platoon-level groups. This means that the vast majority of the troops who celebrated in the streets of Damascus on July 18 returned to their tanks and BMPs after they had enjoyed a short unauthorized break and a lot of sweets. The Syrian tactics were to move swiftly from one pocket of resistance to another. Each such pocket – usually a house or a small cluster of houses – was subjected to a brief barrage. Then, the small armored groups moved on. No attempt was made to storm these buildings or verify the extent of damage and casualties inflicted. As well, the Syrian armed forces did not deploy any flank protection patrols – indicating confidence that they would not be subjected to ambushes. This was a correct decision for there were virtually no lethal ambushes saving for a few bursts of small-arms fire and a couple of RPG rockets. Hence, the small groupings could sustain a fairly high speed.

Starting the pre-dawn hours of July 20, the Syrian armed forces launched the final mop-up of the all-important Meidan district. The Syrian armed forces made a special effort to finish the operation before the Friday mid-day prayers on the first day of Ramadan. They largely succeeded.

First, Special Forces raided known houses where significant opposition commanders were hiding. Some major commanders and highly trained fighters were captured some were killed. The Special Forces clearly exploited excellent detailed intelligence that could not but have come from the people of Meidan themselves. In other words, the civilian population rejected and betrayed the opposition to the Assad administration. The best estimate are that the opposition lost about a hundred people in these pre-dawn sweeps – and this is a huge number for the opposition.

At first light, small armored groupings descended on Meidan. These were also mainly platoon-to-company-level forces. This time, there were more BMPs than tanks. These forces were a combination of the elite 4th Division and the 3rd Tank Division. These small groupings also moved quickly in the streets and struck specific buildings or clusters of buildings. Compared to the mop-up operations of July 19, the Syrian forces employed very low levels of fire power and more accurate fire. The majority of these groupings were indeed out of Meidan by the time the Sunnis started congregating in the mosques.

Most telling is the overall restraining of the Shabiha during these days. Consequently, there were virtually no reports of abuses. There were numerous civilian casualties among those who hid in the buildings used by the opposition – but there were virtually no reports of intentional abuses and slaughter of civilians. Even opposition sources acknowledged that relatively few civilians were killed in the week-long fighting in Damascus – a minuscule number for a city of nearly two million people. This is a significant difference from the atrocities attributed to the Shabiah in other predominantly Sunni cities and slums, especially Hama and Homs.



Consequently, the Sunni population of the greater Damascus remained with the administration. Its sons continue to serve in the armed forces and the security forces, as well as work for the government. In other words, the opposition failed to incite the population into rebelling against the Assad administration. This is the most important achievement of the Assad administration.

Little wonder that the opposition forces had to leave Damascus all together on Friday, July 20. "It is a tactical withdrawal. We are still in Damascus," Abu-Omar, an opposition commander assured journalists from Turkey. However, a Damascus-based commander called Khaled al-Shami acknowledged that the opposition forces carried out "a tactical withdrawal" from Damascus in order "to spare civilians from further bombardments."

On August 2, Jihadist commanders in Damascus reiterated that the Turkey-based FSA played no role in their uprising and that holding neighborhoods had never been part of their plans. "It was an excellent victory," said Abu-Abdullah, a commander from al-Kadam. "We accomplished our objectives, gained experience, and had very low casualties. The Free Army is stronger as a result, and the regime is weaker." Abu-Abdullah stressed that the FSA had had nothing to do with the initial eruption. "The Free Army is inside Syria, not outside. Why should we take orders from Riad al-Asaad? ... We get hardly any of our money or weapons from him. He claimed credit for something he knew nothing about."

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Having failed in Damascus, the opposition shifted to Aleppo – Syria's largest city and economic center. Aleppo is an easier theater for the opposition given the proximity to the Turkish border and the ensuing ability of the opposition to sustain the Jihadist forces from cross-border safe-havens. Ultimately, however, the intensity of the battle for Aleppo, and particularly the extent of the Syrian security forces committed to fighting the opposition, is determined first and foremost by the concurrent build-up of Turkish military forces near the border and extent of Turkish air operations. The battle of Aleppo is thus turning out to be a very important milestone.

On 25 July, the Turkey-based opposition announced the launch of a "decisive battle" for Aleppo and the opposition's presence in the city center. These reports were grossly exaggerated. A few hit-teams of opposition fighters – mainly Jihadists shooters and a few would-be martyr-bombers – infiltrated the center of Aleppo in search for crowds or important individuals. They were quickly located by the security forces with the help of a very hostile population. These hit-teams were pursued by mobile forces on the ground and a few helicopters. A couple of martyr-bombers blew themselves up in the process.

The main opposition forces that were to follow these teams into the center of Aleppo started withdrawing immediately. Some opposition squads tried to reconsolidate presence in the city slums – but the situation remained tenuous as large segments of the population – both Sunnis and Allawites – refused to shelter them and pushed them out. The Syrian air force flew a few low-altitude supersonic passes over the slums – breaking a lot of windows and shanty-walls in the process – as a reminder to the local population of the potential cost of cooperating with the opposition. Toward evening, the main opposition presence was in the outlying slums and blue-collar neighborhoods outside of Aleppo. As well, several opposition forces planned for the second wave – mainly on trucks and mini-buses – turned back and made their way back to Turkey. The important fighting shifted to these suburbs and the roads leading to them.

Most sensitive were the clashes along the roads west of Aleppo – particularly Road 56. This road leads from a main junction west of Aleppo first westwards and then southwards to the village of Haram. In its east-west



section, Road 56 virtually touches the Turkish-Syrian border roughly south of the Turkish township of Reyhanli. Moreover, the Turkish D420 Road runs parallel to Road 56 in this area and also virtually touches the border – but from the Turkish side. This makes the area a favorite of all smugglers – drugs and other criminal smugglers, refugees and opposition fighters, as well as spies. With mobile elements of the 11th Tank Division in hot pursuit of opposition vehicles trying to reach the safety of Turkey – the Turkish military is apprehensive that Syrian forces and/or fire will cross the Turkish border. It is already clear that the Syrian forces do not respect the de-facto 4 - 5 km buffer zone in this area. Hence, the Turks have been beefing up their forces along Road D420. Overnight, Turkish forces repeatedly open automatic fire on Syrian forces trying to close in on opposition trucks racing into Turkey. Whether this fire is in order to deter the Syrians from cross-border hot pursuit or to provide cover for the withdrawing opposition fighters is open for interpretation.

Starting July 26, the fighting in the greater Aleppo area solidified around four foci.

The fighting best covered by the Western media were the clashes south of the Muhafaza area near the old quarter. A few opposition fighters kept hiding in the labyrinth of the old city and emerged to clash with the security authorities. Since this area is also a few blocks away from the Sheraton where the Western media stays – these clashes are covered as “the battle for Aleppo”.

Some of the Jihadist fighters who originally infiltrated Aleppo and reached the Muhafaza area tried to escape eastward. They were chased by the security forces in the Shaar neighborhood. After these fighters seized local civilians and held them as human shields – the population turned against them and started assisting the security forces. Clashes continue as the security forces hunt down the opposition fighters. After a couple of days of intense fighting and running, the opposition forces in eastern Aleppo separated between locally-raised Jihadists who remained in the Sakhour neighborhood and out-of-city Jihadists (both Syrians and foreign volunteers) who kept fighting their way out of eastern Aleppo and toward the Turkish border.

The main fighting took place in the two blue collar and slums districts of Furqan and Salaheddin west of Aleppo. In both outlying districts, the opposition fighters gained support from the poor and migrant workers who have long been alienated from the city’s elites and middle class. In both districts there are genuine uprisings as much against the old order of the Aleppo area as against the Assad administration. As was the case with the suppression of similar uprisings in the blue collar and slums districts of Homs, Hama and other cities on the Damascus-Aleppo road – the military did not attempt to enter the narrow streets. Instead, the foci of resistance were quickly surrounded and subjected to periodic shelling. Given the priority given to meeting the Turkish military threat – the size of the Syrian forces deployed in the Furqan and Salaheddin neighborhoods and the intensity of the shelling were far below these of comparable operations in the Homs and Hama areas.

Meanwhile, the build-up of a major force grouping in northwestern Syria intensified with focus on meeting the Turkish military threat rather than addressing the escalation of opposition activities in and around Aleppo. Significantly, although units and elements of these Syrian forces are periodically engaged in fighting with the opposition in the greater Aleppo area – the primary mission of these forces is to confront the rapidly expanding Turkish military build-up north of the border – especially in the Hatay and Kilis Regions.

The main Syrian forces initially operating in the Aleppo area belong to the reconstituted 11th Tank Division. The division went into inaction slightly more than a year ago for fear of instability among its predominantly Sunni soldiers and NCOs. It was gradually brought back into action since early June after it became clear that the



overall defection/desertion level remained within 10 % and no mutinous activities took place. The return of the 11th Tank Division to the front is part of an emerging pattern where the Syrian High Command is committing a growing number of units to deal with localized problems. The widespread use of the 3rd Tank Division in Damascus also fits this pattern. For the battle of the outlying slums in Aleppo, the 11th Tank Division has been reinforced by a few batteries of “strategic artillery” – namely, 152 mm tube-artillery and 240 mm mortars – that keep hammering the slums. There are reports of the use of “vacuum” (or fuel-air explosive) shells in especially dense areas – causing immense damage and widespread casualties.

By late July, the build-up of the Syrian Armed Forces in the greater Aleppo area stabilized. The Syrians have in the area an Army-level grouping comprised of 4 - 5 divisions and an assorted supporting units. The regional high command – based in the al-Safira installation – is partially based on the cadres of Corps No. 2 as established in summer 2011 to deal with the insurrection in central Syria and particularly the towns of Aleppo, Homs and Hama. Around mid-July, there emerged two distinct headquarters at the high command level – one focused on suppressing the opposition in the greater Homs and Hama area, and the other in the Aleppo area focusing primarily on addressing the Turkish threat and the possibility of foreign intervention.

This build-up does not include the Air Force elements – both fighter-bombers and helicopters – in the Menakh airbase 35 km north of Aleppo, and the ballistic missiles and chemical weapons stored in the al-Safira installation quite close to the Turkish border. When the Syrians deployed artillery rockets and additional ballistic missiles to forward positions recent months in order to warn Turkey – many were deployed to al-Safira and the key command and communication centers of the forces deployed in the entire northwestern Syria are located there. In recent weeks, when the Turks started forward deploying their rockets and missiles, as well as intensified aerial patrols and mock-strikes over the Syrian border, the Syrians consolidated the storage and deployment of all ballistic missiles and warheads (of all types) in the bunkers in order to permit the shielding of the newly deployed assets. Consequently, warheads and missiles might be closer together than before. However, by early August, there is no indication of weaponization or warhead-filling.

The key elements of the Syrian ground forces deployment are four reinforced divisions:

1. The 17th Mechanized Division with supporting tank regiments and heavy artillery batteries. They have been deployed near the village of Musalmieh northeast of Aleppo, some 30 km from the Turkish border, since late June.
2. The 11th Tank Division reinforced by mechanized infantry groupings and a few batteries of “strategic artillery” that has deployed west of Aleppo in the direction of the village of Haram since mid-July.
3. The 18th Tank Division concentration northeast of Idlib. The division absorbed mechanized infantry groupings in the Idlib area and Special Forces. These Special Forces already raided on the night of July 25/26 a regional command center of the opposition – killing 13 and capturing a lot of documents and computers.
4. The 14th Mechanized Division deployed east of Aleppo. This division is based on the mechanized infantry and some artillery forces withdrawn from Syrian Kurdistan and is thus lighter than the other three divisions. (The concurrent developments in both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan are of immense long-term importance. They will be addressed in a separate paper once they reach a stable point permitting analysis.)



There are additional Syrian force groupings in the area – mainly regiment-level units – that seem unattached to the four divisions. They might be coalesced into a fifth division to face the growing Turkish force on the other side of the border.

Meanwhile, Ankara keeps heightening the tension along the border with Syria. The flow of armor, artillery, infantry, air defense and commando to the Syrian border especially in the Hatay and Kilis Regions has intensified markedly since mid-July. On July 24, the Turkish Army deployed their main Chemical Weapons Detection and Decontamination (CWDD) battalion to the Syrian border just across from the al-Safira area. The battalion's deployment was conducted with great fanfare – including the deployment of Special Forces, Military Police, mobile air defense, and infantry units around the CWDD battalion in order to protect it from possible Syrian attacks. The message that the deployment of the CWDD battalion is very clear: Since Syria had threatened to strike invading foreign forces with chemical weapons – the Turkish Armed Forces are ready to meet and cope with this threat.

On July 30, the 100,000-strong Turkish Land Forces' 2nd Army Command and all regional auxiliary units have been put on "standby" – one step below wartime readiness. The 2nd Army and the affected military and security forces units are all deployed in southwestern Turkey near the border with Syria. The HQ of the 2nd Army is at Malatya. Two regular Army Corps come under the 2nd Army. The first Corps is already deployed in forward positions in southwestern Turkey on the Syrian border. The second Corps is in the process of moving some of its units to the eastern parts of the Syrian border facing the Kurdish enclave, while a couple of divisions are already forming a second line behind the first Corps in southwestern Turkey. Finally, there is a special third Corps under the 2nd Army that is comprised of specialist elements. Of these, the two commando brigades, artillery brigade, and chemical defense unit have already deployed to southwestern Turkey, while the elite and politically reliable 4th Division was making its way from Ankara. By early August, the Turkish military and security forces had around 150,000 troops deployed in southwestern Turkey near the Syrian border.

Meeting with the high command to discuss military situation on the Syrian border on July 30, Erdogan stated that the Turkish Army was "on full steam." The commanders reported that "all 2nd Army units in the region are on full alert." On August 1, Erdogan convened and personally chairs the four-day meeting of Turkey's Supreme Military Council. The council meets twice yearly – so this is a scheduled meeting. However, while the council's agenda is usually dominated by personnel issues of the high command such as promotions, retirements and expulsions – this meeting is dedicated to addressing "the Syrian conflict" and related strategic issues.

Meanwhile, the fighting in Aleppo continued to unfold. Early morning, on July 28, elements of the 11th Tank Division, including "strategic artillery", attacked the opposition pockets in the Salaheddin district west of Aleppo. The Syrian forces sealed the area and started bombarding the known and suspected pockets relentlessly. No effort was made by the Syrian armed forces to send forces into the densely built and populated area. Meanwhile, smaller forces of the 18th Tank Division and its add-on mechanized infantry started closing in on the pockets of resistance in the nearby Furqan district west of Aleppo. These forces moved in a slower pace than these of the 11th Tank Division and used less firepower. There were significantly less opposition forces in the Furqan district than in the Salaheddin district. Hence, the Syrian army could take its time there. The Syrian armed forces were using relatively minimal forces in order to seal these areas and prevent the opposition forces from escalating and/or spreading the fighting. This way, the security challenges in Aleppo could be addressed while the bulk of the Syrian forces remain committed to meeting the Turkish threat.



On July 29, the elements of the 11th Tank Division along with artillery and Special Forces were close to completing the clean-up of the Salaheddin and Furqan outlying districts to the west. Some opposition fighters managed to escape to the Hamdaniya area further to the west. They were largely making their way out of the city into the countryside, being pursued by mobile forces and firepower. A few pockets of resistance remained in isolated houses in both Salaheddin and Hamdaniya. Ultimately, their enduring was a question of the amounts of firepower, destruction and civilian casualties the Syrian military was willing to inflict in order to complete the mopping-up. Similarly, in the outlying northeastern districts, opposition fighters were making their way out of the city under pressure from elements of the 14th Mechanized Division.

As was the case in Damascus – the Syrian forces tried to direct their fire onto foci of resistance and minimize the collateral damage. Most shelling was done from close-range, and helicopters were used for fire-control and correction. The mere use of “strategic artillery”, particularly against the Salaheddin district, caused immense destruction and civilian casualties in some city blocks. At the same time, there was no relentless indiscriminate shelling of entire neighborhoods.

Starting mid-day July 29, under immense pressure from the closing in forces and Special Forces strikes, the opposition forces began using the civilian population of western Aleppo as a human shield for their effort to leave the urban areas. Whole families were forced to leave their homes and belongings and make their way to Turkey while hiding opposition fighters as family members. By nighttime, after the Iftar dinner, the induced flow of refugees became a torrent. In mid-day July 30, between 200,000 and 250,000 people (around 10 % of the population) already left the greater Aleppo area for shelter in refugee camps in Turkey – most of them under duress.

Overnight and during the morning of July 30, opposition forces fought to secure a corridor to the Turkish border in order to push through the mass of humanity they had uprooted overnight. In the early morning hours of July 30, opposition forces coming from Turkish territory captured the Anadan checkpoint, about 5 km north-west of the greater Aleppo, and it became possible to push the refugees across the Turkish border. The Turkish authorities had been forewarned as numerous teams were onsite to register the refugees and move them to newly constructed camps. The opposition fighters hiding in their midst were transferred to their own camps. As well, General Ferzat Abdul Nasser (who had deserted about a month ago and is now with the FSA) was on hand with a group of Western journalists to record the unfolding humanitarian tragedy and the heroics of the surviving FSA fighters.

By now, the “battle for Aleppo” already crossed the point of no return. The opposition was largely pushed out of the main strongholds in the outlying western districts but the fighting and suffering were far from over. From the beginning, the “battle for Aleppo” was a political gambit inspired by Obama’s Washington and pushed on the ground by Doha and Riyadh. The aim was to create a Benghazi-style free zone inside Syria that the US, the UN and the Arab League would be able to recognize as the site of “the real Syrian government”. As well, the US and its allies would be able to declare the “free Aleppo” as a safe zone – thus meriting military protection by the international community and opening the door to Kosovo-style US-led military intervention. Significantly, Saudi Arabia’s new Intelligence supremo – Prince Bandar bin Sultan – planned on capitalizing on the Aleppo gambit in order to restore Saudi Arabia’s preeminence in the eyes of Washington. Hence, already on July 28, Saudi Arabia convened a formal meeting of the Arab UN delegations in Cairo in order to formulate the text of a motion for the UNGA demanding that all UN members “recognize the safe havens rising in Syria”



and “support them”.

However, in committing to the Aleppo gambit, the West adopted its own self-made propaganda – namely, that the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a viable entity capable of conducting any operation inside Syria. In reality, the Aleppo surge was conducted by Jihadist forces under Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Okaidi whose affiliation with the FSA is questionable at best. After his defection, Okaidi emerged as a Jihadist leader and the commander of the “Banner of Islam” forces. In reality, the “Banner of Islam” is a Syrian front for the Qatar-sponsored foreign legion – a Jihadist force comprised mainly of Syrian, Libyan, Iraqi and other foreign Jihadists. Until late July, Okaidi only paid some lip service to recognizing the FSA as supreme authority in order to get vast quantities of weapons and funds from the Qataris and the Turks.

The West’s inclination to go along with the “Banner of Islam” forces as an ostensible arm of the FSA in the greater Aleppo area demonstrates just how little the West knows, understands and cares. The population of Aleppo has always been the bedrock of the urban traditional, thus of tribal-background, Sunni population, as well as Allawite, Armenian, Orthodox Christian (whose historic cathedral was one of the first buildings the opposition forces captured, desecrated and destroyed by Okaidi’s Jihadists) and Circassian extended families. Together, this cosmopolitan elite has dominated the Syrian economy that is based on commercial relations of the Syrian state with Turkey, the Arabian Peninsula and Europe. The majority of the population of the greater Aleppo area provided the workforce for this economic engine – and was thus increasingly urbane and secularized. Little wonder that greater Aleppo has adamantly refused to join the rebellion despite repeated Jihadist car-bombs and other acts of urban terrorism. Hence, there was no basis whatsoever to the presumption that a Jihadist force – Syrian or international – would somehow be able to mobilize and galvanize the population of Aleppo into rebelling against the Syrian modern state. Yet, Western governments and media hailed the Jihadist upsurge as a genuine grassroots “battle for Aleppo”.

On July 30, the focus shifted to the human tragedy created by the fighting. Speaking in Abu Dhabi, the SNC’s Abdel Basset Sieda declared that “world must intervene to stop the Aleppo massacre” and demanded extensive military, financial and humanitarian assistance. “Our friends and allies will bear responsibility for the terrifying massacres that will happen in Aleppo if they don’t move soon. This regime is planning for a big massacre in Aleppo,” Sieda declared. The US and the other “Friends of Syria” now concentrated on preventing Aleppo from becoming yet another Srebrenica even though the humanitarian crisis was opposition-created and the Syrian forces showed no inclination to pulverize the city (if only because the greater Aleppo has sided with the Damascus administration). Nevertheless, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius announced that France will ask for an urgent UNSC meeting on Syria. UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos demanded “safe access to Aleppo for aid groups” because “an unknown number of people are trapped in the city” and have “appealed for help from the international community”.

Meanwhile, as of 31 July, there remained two distinct foci of fighting in the greater Aleppo area.

- Mopping-up continued in the Salaheddin district mainly by elements of the 11th Tank Division. These forces were conducting cautious, slow and determined operations in order to minimize collateral damage and casualties even though the forced eviction of the population by the Jihadist “Banner of Islam” forces had made parts of the neighborhood ghost towns. Smaller elements of the 18th Tank Division and its add-on mechanized infantry conducted mop-up operations in the other outlying western districts of Aleppo.



- The 14th Mechanized Division encountered difficulties in the Sakhour neighborhood of eastern Aleppo. The main opposition forces operating there were the locally-raised “Aleppo Heroes Brigade” under the command of Malek al-Kurdi. These are local Islamist-Jihadist fighters who know the area intimately and therefore are step ahead of the security forces. The main problem faced by the 14th Mechanized Division was that the opposition captured a few well protected police stations and government buildings. In contrast, the 14th Mechanized Division forces entering Sakhour were lighter than usual and lacked tank and artillery support. Hence, once they stalled in front of these fortified buildings, they had to rely on intensified helicopter strikes and sporadic attacks by light strike aircraft (converted L-39 trainers) and a few fighter-bombers (MiG-23/27s). Hence, Qatari foreign legion teams with 20-25 Libya-origin MANPADs were sent to Aleppo in early August in the hope of downing helicopters and/or fighter-bombers.

In early August, the battle for Aleppo has become a political-media show at the expense of the population.

The real fighting continues in eastern Aleppo – mainly the Sakhour neighborhood. The locally-raised “Aleppo Heroes Brigade” under the command of Malek al-Kurdi holds onto the building the captured a few days beforehand. Emboldened by the military’s inability to flush them out, they started conducting raids and ambushes on Syrian patrols and positions in the area. So far, both sides have largely refrained from using civilians as human shields and objects of strike. Hence, civilian casualties are relatively low (compared to other cities) – and the population does not revolt. However, there is a limit to just how long the military will be willing to tolerate this stand-off. Any attempt to flesh the opposition out will necessitate the use of heavy firepower – that is, heavy collateral casualties and damage. The main problem facing the “Aleppo Heroes Brigade” is that they are completely surrounded. They captured large stockpiles of weapons and ammunition in the government buildings – but these won’t last long. Hence, Malek al-Kurdi will soon have to decide whether to attempt a breakout – which means abandoning the Sakhour neighborhood to the military – or a heroic last stand.

Goaded by Obama’s Washington, Western media is focusing anew on the fighting in the outlying western districts of Aleppo. The fighting is now openly conducted and claimed by the Jihadist “Banner of Islam” forces under Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Okaidi. Starting late July, the Qatari-sponsored foreign legion was able to smuggle into the western Aleppo area a couple of hundred Jihadist trained fighters – both Syrians and foreign volunteers – along with numerous pick-up trucks, heavy machine guns, RPGs, munitions and, most important, 20 - 25 Libya-origin MANPADs. The foreign Jihadists identified themselves as the “Abu-Emara Battalion” and stressed that they were not affiliated with the FSA. They joined Okaidi and significantly reinforced his dwindling forces and supplies. Initially, coordination was disastrously lacking. For example, on 31 July, dozens of just arrived Jihadists were killed or injured in a series of blasts when an IED-theater they were planting in order to entrap the Syrian security forces was detonated accidentally by local Jihadists who did not know of the arrival and operations of the Jihadist reinforcements.

However, starting August 2, the rejuvenated and reorganized Jihadist forces intensified their raids on, and ambushes of, Syrian military and security forces in the western Aleppo area. The availability of good trucks, trained drivers and ample of fuel enabled the Jihadist forces to expand their area of operations, conduct bolder hit and run strikes, and disappear faster into the dense suburbs well before the cumbersome Syrian forces could properly react. The damage and casualties inflicted by these raids were minuscule. Syrian tanks were able



to hit only a few trucks – killing a few dozen Jihadists and capturing a few. So far, the Syrian military refrained from indiscriminate shelling of the neighborhoods where the Jihadists are hiding.

An attempt was made on August 2 by the opposition to use a T-54/55 in order to lob a few shells at the Menakh airbase some 35 km north of Aleppo. No damage was inflicted and the Jihadists then fled to Turkey fearing reprisals.

Meanwhile, Syrian security forces started launching assertive preventive operations west of Aleppo despite the proximity to the Turkish border. Overnight, 2/3 August, they interdicted some of the Jihadist infiltration efforts on the roads between the Turkish border and western Aleppo.

As well, starting the morning of August 3, there are growing indications that the Syrian security forces are preparing to launch a major operation to clear the entire Aleppo area. Three “reinforcement teams” – each at least regiment-strong – are being sent to Aleppo. Exact force composition and unit affiliation are not clear yet. Syrian commanders were instructed that their mission would be “to eliminate the foreign-backed armed men and restore security to the city.” Significantly, the Syrian commanders’ instructions emphasized that the local civilians are friends and allies caught and held hostage by the foreign rebels. “The spiral of violence is still increasing,” Herve Ladsous, UN peacekeeping chief, said. “The focus two weeks ago was on Damascus. The focus is now on Aleppo where there has been a considerable build-up of military means and where we have reason to believe that the main battle is about to start.”

Late night on August 3, a Syrian senior official briefed the UN personnel in Damascus about the impending escalation. “The battle for Aleppo has not yet begun, and what is happening now is just the appetizer,” he said. “The main course will come later.” The official explained that Damascus is being forced to act proactively because “the other side is sending reinforcements” in order to escalated the fighting. He estimated that the Syrian forces committed to the fighting might reach as many as 20,000 troops – that is, about a third of the forces deployed in the area.

Overnight, 3/4 August, Jihadist forces attempted advance from the Salaheddine district and seize the main Radio and TV building in central Aleppo. They succeeded to enter the building and reach some of the main studios. They planted explosives and blew up some of the equipment inside. Syrian security forces quickly surrounded and besieged the building. They brought in helicopters that flew low to observe the situation as well as struck the building. Consequently, mobile security forces were able to interdict and destroy Jihadist reinforcements attempting to reach the Radio and TV building. After daybreak, security forces began shelling the building as infantry attempted to break in. By mid-day, the opposition forces abandoned the building with some of them surrendering to the security forces. A Jihadist commander claimed that his forces had to make a “tactical retreat” because of the heavy shelling by artillery and helicopters.

The Syrian security forces also initiated several special operations starting the predawn hours of August 4. Special Forces raided several building housing opposition commanders and key cadres. Several commanders were either killed or captured, but in a few cases the raids were botched and the commanders and cadres were able to escape. Jihadist sources claimed that Iranian Pasdaran snipers were assisting the Syrian Special Forces – killing Jihadist fighters from long distance as they were attempting to escape the Special Forces’ raids.

In the morning, artillery and strike aircraft – including Su-25s that can deliver heavier bombs and guided munitions – started attacking known concentrations of opposition forces throughout the Salaheddine district. This



was the heaviest attack on Aleppo since the beginning of the war. By late morning, small armored units – platoon to company level – started advancing in the main streets under the cover of artillery and helicopter fire. These tanks and BMPs systematically destroyed opposition strong points. The Syrian forces have accurate intelligence so that even the initial encounters were painful for the opposition. Consequently, by late afternoon Jihadist forces had to evacuate wide segments of the Salaheddine district and attempt to withdraw into the countryside.

Still hiding in Aleppo, Colonel Abdel Jabbar al-Okaidi insisted that the Jihadist “Banner of Islam” the “Abu-Emara Battalion” forces under his command are determined to withstand the major onslaught that is still to come. “We have information that the Syrian army is planning a strong offensive against Aleppo. We know they are planning to attack the city using tanks and aircraft, shooting at us for three to four days and they plan to take the city,” Okaidi reported on August 4. He acknowledged that the Jihadist forces have no military answer for the might of the Syrian military. He is confident that the Syrian forces would collapse from within once heavy fighting started. “At the moment the soldiers cannot leave their bases and they are too afraid to defect. Once they are inside our city they will take off their uniforms and join us,” Okaidi explained. So far, the cohesion and performance of the Syrian security forces do not support Okaidi’s hopes.

In Turkey, an FSA spokesman claimed the Aleppo attack and acknowledged its failure. “The Free Syria Army pushed from Salaheddine to al-Adhamiya where they clashed this morning with Syrian troops. But they had to retreat.”

Also in early August, the build-up of both Syrian and Turkish forces on both sides of the border continues unabated even as some of the Syrian forces are diverted to dealing with the fighting in and around Aleppo.

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The war in Syria has long become a political war in which pawns and proxies of outside powers wage their wars on the backs of a devastated prostrate civilian population. Still, the Obama Administration is warning anew of an impending “new Srebrenica” in Aleppo – just like the one that threatened Benghazi not too long ago – reawakening the specter of a Kosovo-style US-led military intervention. The international community is very slow to act. The Saudi non-binding UNGA resolution was passed on August 3 with 133 states supporting and 12 against, with 31 abstaining. Voted on was a significantly watered down text. Most important are the changes between the second and third drafts. Removed was the last perambular paragraph that the UNGA is “welcoming the relevant League of Arab States’ decisions, including its 22 July 2012 resolution, in particular its appeal to the Syrian President to step down from power.” And removed were the two operative paragraphs that called on all UN member states to adopt sanctions like the Arab League.

However, the new President of the Security Council for August is Gerard Araud of France – one of the staunchest supporters of US Ambassador Susan Rice and the US interventionist policy in Syria. He is already capitalizing on the diluting of the Saudi initiative and Annan’s resignation in order to call for a humanitarian intervention and forceful regime change given the “Srebrenica-type atrocities” committed by the Syrian security forces in Damascus and especially Aleppo. Nevertheless, in his opening speech at the UNGA prior to the debate on the Saudi resolution – Ban Ki-Moon warned that the Syria conflict is already a “proxy war” and reminded all major powers that “the immediate interests of the Syrian people must be paramount over any larger rivalries of influence.” But nobody cares to listen.



Alas, there is an explosive disconnect between the real situation in Syria and the interventionist aspirations of the international community.

Strategically, the Assad administration won the war already in fall 2011. The traditional key to ruling Syria is an alliance between the security and economic elites – and Assad’s Damascus has already succeeded to restore this alliance. This success is aptly demonstrated in the sustenance and cohesion of the Syrian security forces that are predominantly Sunni in the continuous intense fighting and the minuscule rates of defection and desertion. In the strategic zones of Syria, the opposition remains contained in several slums and neighborhoods.

On the ground, however, the war in Syria remains at a deadlock as the multi-faceted fratricidal carnage keeps escalating and spreading. The main engine of violence is the flow of Syrian and foreign Jihadists, weapons and funds from Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. These Jihadists have increased the pace of politically embarrassing strikes at the centers of Damascus, Aleppo and other cities to the detriment of the civilian population that suffers the brunt of the security forces’ reaction. Concurrently, these Jihadists also fight the indigenous tribal insurrection in the vast interior – al-Jazira – in order to transform it by force into an Islamist Jihad. Consequently, while these urban strikes and the escalating militancy at the heartland are not sufficient to overthrow, or even challenge, the Assad administration – they devastate the people of Syria. The Jihadists also prevent both Assad’s Damascus and the genuine opposition led by the Syrian Liberation Army from containing the conflict, let alone bringing it to a negotiated end.

Meanwhile, the escalation of violence in Syria is being exploited by the US and its allies – mainly France, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia – as the justification for furthering their own assertive interventionist policy in support of the Islamists-Jihadists. The US and allied goal is the promotion of a Libya-style foreign intervention in Syria in the name of preventing a “new Srebrenica” and the ensuing empowerment of the Islamists-Jihadists in Damascus. The mere specter of such a US-led intervention already provides the Islamist-Jihadist forces, who lack genuine popular support inside Syria, with the incentive to escalate their urban strikes in the hope of provoking the security forces into harming innocent civilians while fighting the Jihadists hiding in their midst. The US and its allies will then be able to capitalize on the Jihadist-provoked humanitarian tragedy as the justification for a Western military intervention in Syria that will, in turn, empower the Islamists-Jihadists in Damascus just as the US-led West did for the Islamists-Jihadists in Tripoli, Libya. That the Syrian people will pay the ultimate price for these cynical machinations matters to none.

Remarks: *Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*