



A Heretic's Musings on Victory in Syria

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Executive Summary

- The fratricidal war in Bilad al-Sham – that is, historic Greater Syria for the State of Syria hardly exists any more – is about to cross its second crucial milestone. Both milestones – the first being in October 2011 – were major turning-points advancing a victory by the Assad administration. The predominantly Islamist-Jihadist rebels were never close to victory – but are now closer than ever to defeat. By the time the flames subside and the dust settles, there will emerge a completely new-old Middle East full of wrath – capitalizing on the legacy of past conquests and unresolved humiliations as the *raison d'être* for its very existence and quest for inflicting historic retribution and revenge.
- By mid-May 2013, there has been a profound change in the popular attitude of the Syrian population. According to new data, 70% of Syrians now support the Assad administration, 20% are “neutral” and want to be left alone, and only 10% support the Jihadists and other rebels. This means that the majority of the 60% of the “neutrals” decided that the Jihadist threat was so great it merited a Faustian deal with the Assad administration. Having to choose between the Jihadists’ imposition of Arab-Islamist way of life and retaining their tribe-and-clan based traditions while living under Assad’s Damascus – the population overwhelmingly opted for the latter. Bashar al-Assad is not going anywhere because his people prefer him, imperfect as he is, to any alternate leader the Jihadists offer.
- Comes summer – Ankara, Doha, Washington and their allies will have to choose between accepting defeat in Syria and the victory of the Assad administration, and between sponsoring a major cross-border escalation and surge into Syria that, irrespective of its outcome, will be Turkish and allied intervention in all but name. Moreover, it will be politically nearly impossible for the US-led West/NATO not to intervene should this surge be defeated by Damascus and its allies. Furthermore, Damascus and its allies will be in position to unleash Turkey’s oppressed minorities starting with the Alawites/Alavis in the areas from where the Jihadists operate and bringing in the Kurds. It will be impossible for Erdogan’s Turkish military, emaciated as it is by the purge of Westernized officers, to stem the tide.
- Hence, the main quandary facing the international community is not whether Bashar al-Assad the individual remains in power, nor is it whether “his” administration survives the upheaval. The main challenge in resolving the Syria crisis is preventing the replacement of an Alawite-Druze dominated government by an Islamist-Jihadist regime. Thus, in addressing the turmoil in Syria special attention must be paid not to throw out the baby (Alawite-Druze preeminence) with the bath water (ending the fratricidal violence). Democratic reforms must acknowledge the country’s Sunni majority and diversity of character and interests, but not at the expense of the minorities. The marginalization and destruction of the Syrian section of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, even if in the name of democracy, not only will not elevate the Sunni majority but will cause cataclysmic upheaval throughout the greater Middle East.



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ANALYSIS

The fratricidal war in Bilad al-Sham—that is, historic Greater Syria for the State of Syria hardly exists anymore—is about to cross its second crucial milestone. Both milestones—the first being in October 2011—were major turning-points advancing a victory by the Assad administration. The predominantly Islamist-Jihadist rebels were never close to victory—but are now closer than ever to defeat. Meanwhile, the fratricidal war that keeps spreading throughout historic northern al-Jazira is consuming in its flames the territories of the states of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Jordan, while crossing the borders of both Turkey and Israel. The quintessence of the tidal-wave of grassroots violence now escalating and spreading through al-Jazira is that fratricidal violence will continue for decades to come—long after the war itself has been decided at the strategic political level. By the time these flames subside and the dust settles, there will emerge a completely new-old Middle East full of wrath—capitalizing on the legacy of past conquests and unresolved humiliations as the *raison d'être* for its very existence and quest for inflicting historic retribution and revenge.

This anticipated gloom and doom is all but inevitable given the impact of the misguided policies of the leading Western powers who insist in intervening in the Syrian crisis as well as the rest of the Islamist Intifada's they still insist on calling "the Arab Spring". The key point missed by the leading Western powers is that no matter how important the fighting between the Assad and allied Shiite forces and the Jihadist rebel forces and their Sunni-Jihadist allies have been—the truly decisive struggle has been over the soul of the silent majority of Syrians. And in this crucial battle the Jihadists lost already in fall 2011, but Assad's Damascus is only now—summer 2013—prevailing.

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The overall dynamics engulfing the Greater Middle East must be examined in regional historical frameworks because the quintessence of the Intifada's is the rejection of modernity as represented by the modern Arab State and the embracing of traditional Islamic-Islamist socio-political frameworks in their stead.

Indeed, the real situation in Syria is far more complicated than a mere civil war because of the unique role of both historic Bilad al-Sham and modern Syria on the fault lines between al-Jazira and the Fertile Crescent of Minorities.

Historically, the Mashriq has always been dominated by the socio-political dynamics in the Arab heartland—al-Jazira—roughly from the shores of the Arabian Sea to northern Iraq, and from eastern Iraq to the Gaza Strip. This Arab cauldron—predominantly Sunni but including Shiite Arabs as well—has a tendency to spread roughly from south to north through the instrument of radicalization and Jihadization to the detriment of Arab nationalism. This ascent is not only contained, but at times also reversed, by three external powers that seek to advance and expand into, as well as extend their influence and hegemony onto, these Arab lands. Historically, these were the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Caliphate and the Egyptian Caliphate (that at its peak as the Fatimid Caliphate, 909-1171, was ruled by Ismaili Shiites). Throughout history and in earlier incarnations, these three powers have had hegemonic aspirations—through various means ranging from cultural-economic influence to outright military occupation—over the Mashriq. Presently, these three powers are reincarnated as Mahdivist Iran, neo-Ottomanist Turkey, and Ikhwani Egypt.



The fault lines between the Arab cauldron and the surrounding great powers are comprised of a thin line of minorities that, together, constitute the core of the Fertile Crescent. These minorities are, from east to west, the Ahwazi Arabs of southwestern Iran, the Kurds, the Alavis/Alawites, the Druze, the Maronites and the Jews, as well as smaller minorities such as the Armenians and Cherkess/Circassians. This Fertile Crescent of Minorities has historically provided the stabilizing buffer regulating the spread of influence of Iran, Turkey and Egypt. Initially, these minorities were discriminated against and oppressed by the various Arab rulers of the Mashriq. Between 1517 and 1917, the minorities along the Levant shores of the Mediterranean were relied upon by the Ottoman Sultans as the primary instrument facilitating their rule over the entire Mashriq. After 1917, Western powers have considered and used the Levant minorities as the purveyors of pro-Western strategic posture, modernity and Westernization to the Middle East. As a rule, whenever the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, and especially their Levant section, was strong and viable – it constituted the key to regional stability and purveyor of modernity and growth.

Thus, the crux of the lingering crisis in and around Syria is the fate of the minorities' rule in Damascus and the potentially horrendous ramifications of its demise. The Bashar al-Assad administration is based on the dominant preeminence of the Alawites and the Druze who control the security apparatus, and the support of the urban economic elites comprised of westernized Sunnis, Orthodox Christians and the Armenians. Moreover, the situation in Syria cannot be separated from the situation in Lebanon where the local minorities – the Maronites, Druze, Alawites and Armenians – are threatened by the ascent of the Iran-sponsored Shiite HizbAllah in the south and center, and al-Qaida affiliated Jihadists in the north and Palestinian camps in the south. Hence, with perfect grand-strategic logic, Tehran is capitalizing on the plight of Assad's Damascus in order to coopt Syria's minorities and further consolidate Iran's strategic-hegemonic presence along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean (which is supplemented by Iran's presence in the Gaza Strip and growing influence in Morsi's Ikhwan Egypt). Iran-sponsored war with Israel will therefore take on the last entrenched and adamantly anti-Iran minorities – the Jews, as well as the Druze and the Cherkess/Circassians of Israel.

When violence and civil disorder erupted in Syria in early spring 2011 – the country was still a functioning state. Modern Syria is essentially the balancing of three foci of power: (1) Security apparatus that relies on the Alawite, Druze and Kurdish minorities; (2) Urban-economic elite that relies on westernized Sunni families, Armenian and Orthodox Christian minorities; (3) Radicalized, conservative and tribal Sunni population in the rural areas and increasingly the urban slums. Power in Damascus has always been based on two foci playing against the third. Starting the early-1970's, Rifaat al-Assad (brother of then president Hafez al-Assad and vice-president, and now exiled in Western Europe) consolidated an alliance between the security and economic elites that sustained stability in the country even after the exile of Rifaat and the death of Hafez.

Bashar al-Assad rose to power in July 2000 after the death of his father Hafez. He immediately promised the urban economic elite widespread reforms in return for their support for him succeeding his father. Instead of delivering, Bashar sought to transform the power system into an alliance with the radicalized Sunnis under Iranian umbrella. He expected the Syrian Islamists to be satisfied with financial handouts and growing involvement in regional Jihadist causes (Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian territories, etc.). Empowered by the Islamist Intifada's all around them and inherently anti-Shiite – the Syrian Islamists demanded more domestic power and Sunni-Islamist character for the state. When Bashar refused – they rebelled in spring 2011.

It took Assad's Damascus a few months to grasp the severity of the crisis and the intensity of the fighting. Soon afterwards, Damascus formulated a national strategy for confronting the crisis that is still in effect. The key to



the government's strategy starting mid-2011 has been the dividing of Syria into three strategic zones on the basis of their importance for the survival of the Assad administration and the running of post-war Syria. The military priorities and resource allocation have since been based on this division.

1. The minorities' bloc that is comprised of the traditional lands of the minorities upon which the security apparatus relies. These are the Alawite strip along the Mediterranean coastline between Lebanon and Turkey, the Druze area in the southwest up to the Jordanian and Israeli borders, and the Kurdish area in the northeast largely along the Turkish border but also part of the border with Iraq (where Syria's oil fields are located).
2. The economic-strategic belt that is the area where the national economy (industry and commerce), as well as defense industries and strategic stockpiles, are located. Geographically, this is a relatively narrow strip between Damascus and Aleppo that includes the two key industrial cities Hama and Homs. This strip borders the Alawite strip on the west and the Druze area on the south, but also borders the Turkey on the northwest and north, and the rest of Syria on the east.
3. The vast interior that is comprised of essentially the rest of Syria to the east of the belt and to the south of the Kurdish zone. This area enjoys access to parts of the border with Turkey and the porous borders with Iraq and Jordan. This area is inhabited mainly by Sunni tribes and extended families, both conservative Arab and Islamists, that cross over into Iraq and Jordan. This area is economically depressed because of endemic absence of water and lack of infrastructure (roads, electricity, etc.), and therefore does not have great prospects for the future. Hence, this region has been the source of internal migration to urban slums in the main cities. These areas are implacably hostile to Damascus - that is, to ANY government in Damascus - because of unchangeable destitute and are thus susceptible to radicalization.

With the exception of the crucial slums in the main industrial cities in the economic-strategic belt and the Christian enclaves in the northeast - these strategic zones essentially overlap the three foci of power that make modern Syria. This explains the military strategy of Assad's Damascus.

The ultimate priority of the Assad administration - to secure the traditional regions of the key minorities - was attained in summer 2011. There continued few clashes on the Jordanian and Turkish borders as a result of infiltration attempts. But these eruptions could not alter the basic reality that Damascus's hold over these regions was, and still is, firm and that the local population actively supports the Assad administration and its war effort. Presently, these areas are essentially quiet with the local population is supporting the administration. The minorities' knowledge that they will be slaughtered under a Sunni-Jihadist administration only reinforces their commitment to Assad's Damascus.

The second priority - to control the economic-strategic belt - is being implemented ruthlessly. The turning point came in the early fall of 2011 when the Assad administration concluded that the most crucial foci of the urban-economic elite in Aleppo and Damascus would not cast their lot with the rebels (and some would even ponder supporting the administration). Consequently, government forces could safely focus on ruthlessly suppressing the radicalized Sunni population of the urban slums and blue-collar neighborhoods that stand in the way of the region's pacification and return to some economic activities. This approach was largely successful because rebel presence was quickly contained to several slums and neighborhoods rather than spreading into the rural areas.



However, with the Jihadist elements holding firm and even escalating strikes from their parts of Homs and Hama – the administration's efforts became more ruthless and desperate to the point of suppressing by heavy indiscriminate shelling and bombing some of the die-hard slums and neighborhoods in Homs and Hama. The secondary mission of the government's security forces was preventing the relentless efforts by Turkey-based Jihadist forces to reach Aleppo in order to provoke insurrection, as well as prevent a similar Jihadist infiltration from northeastern Lebanon into nearby Homs and on to Hama. But the Assad administration was adamant on suppressing the Jihadist insurrection in the economic-strategic belt at all cost. By fall 2011, both Syrian government and rebel leaders concurred that the Assad forces would soon succeed if left to their own devices.

Strategically, the Assad administration won the war already in fall 2011. The traditional key to ruling modern Syria has always been an alliance between the minorities-dominated security and Sunni-dominated urban economic elites – and 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. The bitter fighting in Aleppo is a desperate yet doomed effort by the Jihadists and their Turkish sponsors to challenge this status quo.

This trend was clearly reflected in the popular support for the Assad administration to the extent that reliable polling is possible. In the second half of December 2011, YouGov conducted a major poll commissioned by the Qatar Foundation throughout the Arab World. The key question was whether Bashar al-Assad should resign. The poll found that 55% of Syrians did not want Bashar al-Assad to resign as president – that is, 55% of Syrians wanted him to remain president. Significantly, in a poll conducted in December 2010, that is, just before the outbreak of the current crisis, only 46% of Syrians considered Bashar al-Assad a good president for Syria. The YouGov poll also found that 68% of Syrians disapproved of the Arab League sanctions.

In contrast, the YouGov poll showed that outside Syria 81% of Arabs "want President Assad to step down". The respondents based their opinion regarding Assad on the coverage of Syrian events on Arab Satellite TV news channels. In other words, Arab Satellite TV news channels such as the Qatar-based al-Jazeera and al-Arabia have had a profound impact on the regional public opinion in favor of the opposition to Assad while Syrian domestic public opinion increased its support for Assad.

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In early 2012, the Syrian deep interior remained the main lingering problem of the war. From a pure military point of view, the government's task was manageable. Violence and instability in the interior had negligible effect on the functioning of the Syrian state for this depends on the minority zones and the economic belt – both of which were under the effective control of the Assad administration. The primary tasks of the Syrian security forces were reducing the level of Islamist-Jihadist insurrection in the area, slowing down the flow of Jihadist volunteers, weapons and funds across the porous borders. Initially, the strategy of Damascus was based on holding onto some of the key cities in the interior and let everything else burn. To fight the Jihadists, Damascus relied heavily on special operations in order to entrap and manipulate both the Syrian and Qatar-sponsored foreign Jihadist elements. Ultimately, this strategy saved Damascus the need for massive use and widespread deployment of regular military forces Syria did not have without sacrificing the government's success.



Initially, the tendency of Damascus was to abandon hinterland and focus on consolidation of hold over strategic Syria – the Damascus-Aleppo zone against growing challenges from across the Turkish and Lebanese borders. Meanwhile, for the Turkey-based opposition leadership the crux of the war for Syria was based on the realization of the strategic victory by Assad's Damascus. Therefore, the self-anointed though Western recognized Islamist opposition leadership concluded that only a major military intervention by Western forces – of the kind that brought down the Qadhafi administration in Libya and empowered an Islamist-Jihadist regime in their stead – would be able to topple the Assad administration and empower the Islamist opposition leaders in Damascus. Hence, the opposition strategy evolved around two foci: (1) Establishing conducive conditions for provoking or seducing or manipulating the US-led West to intervene militarily in Syria on behalf of the Islamists-Jihadists as the US-led NATO did in Libya by creating the Aleppo-is-Benghazi political-media aura; and (2) Enforced Islamicization of the traditionalist Sunni Arab populace, marginalized by Assad's Damascus even though they are the majority of Syrians, in order to demonstrate popular support for the opposition leadership and its Islamist character.

Throughout, the economic elite desperately tried to stay out of the turmoil. This facilitated the crisis that befell on them. The Jihadist suicide-bombing in Aleppo starting February 2012 signaled a change whereupon Aleppo's urban economic elite must get involved in war whether they liked it or not. During most of 2012, Jihadist rebels coerced themselves on the hostile population. The Jihadists attacked the established and well-to-do suburbs, and provoked the Syrian military into shelling and bombing areas where the population was inclined to support the Assad administration. When this did not work, the Jihadists destroyed most of Aleppo including historic and heritage sites of global importance, and emptied a few suburbs into forced exile in order to enhance the humanitarian crisis in Turkey in the hope of inducing an international military intervention. By fall 2012, rebel leaders in Aleppo admitted that between two-thirds and three-quarters of the indigenous population of Aleppo both hated and dreaded the Jihadist rebels. By then, the population could take the abuse no more and, starting with the Kurdish and Alawite suburbs, established local militias that took on the Jihadists and pushed them out of many suburbs and neighborhoods of greater Aleppo. This turning point has since helped the Assad administration.

The ascent of the Jihadists was further complicated when Tehran had the Assad administration release from jail the legendary Jihadist commander and ideologist Abu-Musab al-Suri (who had been in Syrian after special rendition by the US) and close assistant Abu-Khaled sometimes between late-December 2011 and early-January 2012. Back in the early 2000's, Abu-Musab al-Suri was sheltered by Iranian Intelligence and worked closely with the Quds Forces and their up-and-coming commander Brig.Gen. Qassem Soleimani. Almost immediately, there began to emerge in Syria Jihadist vanguard entities of the kind long advocated by Abu-Musab al-Suri. In late January 2012, for example, the previously unknown Jabhat al-Nusrah (Victory Front) published a video called "For the People of Syria from the Mujahedin of Syria in the Fields of Jihad". A commander going by al-Fatih (the Conqueror) Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani (that is, from the Golan Heights) delivered a Jihadist address threatening the US, the West, the Arab League, Turkey and Iran, for their solidarity and collaboration with the Assad regime against the Sunni Muslims. He claimed that Jabhat al-Nusrah was active all over Syria – from Hama to Dara. The video concludes with a group of fighters in the contentious Idlib area that belong to the Brigade of the Free Greater Syria (Kataeb Ahrar ash-Sham) swear their allegiance to Jabhat al-Nusrah. The implication is that these fighters now join the real Jihad – a Sunni Jihad actually controlled by Assad's closest allies in Tehran.



Meanwhile, already in spring 2012 there emerged a political imperative for Assad's Damascus to reduce the level of fratricidal violence all over the country, as well as move forward toward a viable and legitimate negotiations process with the grassroots populace. Furthermore, because of family and tribal connections between the rural population in the deep interior and the slum dwellers in the western cities, as well as the tribal population in the villages surrounding the western cities and in Aleppo itself – Damascus could not ignore completely the popular dynamics and awakening in the interior. Thus, while the ongoing turmoil was incapable of threatening the Assad administration and its continued consolidation of victory – the interior could not be left completely unattended for either.

The situation in Syria's predominantly Sunni Arab interior remained complex. The population is overwhelmingly tribal and rural with pockets of urban extended families. The growing economic hardships of the last three decades, particularly the failure of the Soviet-style institutionalization of agriculture and the destruction of water resources mainly due to experimentation with cotton growing, led to grassroots alienation and rejection of the state system. Instead, the population has increasingly rallied around tribal and extended family frameworks in order to jointly survive the hardships. When blood-relation frameworks failed to remedy the situation – the youth abandoned the interior in quest for livelihood in either the urban slums in western Syria or in the ranks of the security forces that largely deployed near Syria's borders and away from the interior. Hence, the population that has endured the hardships and remained stable in the Syrian interior is socially conservative and inward looking – that is, committed to the empowerment of tribe and extended family at the expense of the centralized state.

The lingering hardship, however, has left the grassroots population vulnerable to Islamist radicalization particularly by Gulf-origin charities that offered humanitarian assistance. The Islamist-Jihadist leadership sought to capitalize on the population's hardship and despair in order to impose Chechenization of the kind attempted by the Jihadist leadership in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus since the mid 1990's. Chechenization is the term used to describe a profound transformation of a predominantly Muslim society from its traditional, largely pre-Islamic, structure to dominance by Islamist-Jihadist elements that historically have been alien to that society. The outcome of Chechenization is not only the Arabization of that society's value system, social structure and way of life – but society's seemingly voluntary abandonment of its own cultural heritage and forfeiture of its manifest destiny in favor of complete subservience to pan-Islamic Jihadist causes the realization of which are detrimental to the existential self-interest of that society.¹

Although Chechnization largely failed by the mid-2000's and the heavy-handed attempted implementation played a major role in the Russian victory in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, Jihadist leaders elsewhere continue to consider Chechenization the key to long-term hold over otherwise hostile populations. Indeed, it is not by accident that starting the summer of 2012 the supreme commander of the Jaish Muhajireen wa Ansar [the Army of Emigrants and Supporters] has been Emir Abu-Omar al-Chichani [the Chechen]. The Jaish is the main organized force of the foreign Mujahedin fighting in Syria in their own units (as distinct from those foreign volunteers integrated into Jihadist units based on al-Jazira people – that is, Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese Jihadists). In the second half of 2012, there were some 6,000-10,000 foreign Jihadists under Abu-Omar al-Chichani.

¹ For detailed analysis of the attempted implementation of Chechenization in the North Caucasus and its ultimate failure and defeat see Yossef Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad: Al-Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror*, New York NY, Harper, 2007



In late summer and early fall 2012, the grassroots population in Syria's al-Jazira largely rejected the heavy-handed attempts to enforce Chechenization. Overwhelmed by the hardships of self-survival, the grassroots opted to withdraw from the struggle for Syria. Hence, the distribution of the popular standing in the war was: 25% of the population supported the Assad administration, 15% supported the Islamist-Jihadist rebellion, and 60% "neutrals" who hated Assad but dreaded the Jihadists and therefore stayed out of the war. This rejection by the grassroots compelled the Jihadist leadership to abandon dealing with the grassroots and instead focus on inducing a Western military intervention. Meanwhile, despite the Western political support for, and Western media reports about, the Free Syrian Army and other ostensibly nationalist armed opposition – internally, the entire armed opposition was Jihadist. There remained hair-splitting differences between various Jihadist units – albeit mainly due to the whims of their charismatic commanders and religious guides rather than policy or ideology. Furthermore, the rebels' logistical life-lines were increasingly controlled by Turkey and funded mainly by Qatar – and both made sure that localized forces that did not toe the Jihadist line were stifled and starved into inaction.

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Muhammad Morsi assumed office as the President of Egypt on 30 June 2012 – a move that would have a major impact on the US-led policy toward Syria. Prior to Morsi's ascent, Turkey was torn between two regional approaches to the Syrian and Mashriq crisis. On the one hand, there was the possibility of consolidating a Sunni north-south bloc with Saudi Arabia that would confront an Iran-dominated Shiite east-west axis. On the other hand, there was the possibility of building with Iran a coalition of the outside forces that would destroy the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and suppress the Arabian hinterland (al-Jazira). Turkey's near total dependence on highly subsidized Iranian oil and gas further complicated Ankara's decision making. Ultimately, Turkey's objective has always been controlling Sunni Islam and Arabia's oil.

Soon after Morsi's ascent, Cairo introduced, and Obama's Washington enthusiastically endorsed, a grand strategic arrangement based on a Tripartite Alliance of the outside forces encircling the Mashriq, jointly destroying the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, and ultimately suppressing and controlling al-Jazira. The contemporary aspirations of the Islamist Tripartite Alliance – Iran, Turkey and Egypt – are essentially the revival of their traditional quest for spheres of influence as Mahdivist Iran/Persia, neo-Ottomanist Turkey, and Ikhwani Egypt (as both the contemporary United Arab Republic and the reincarnation of historic Bilad al-Kanana). These three powers have long had hegemonic aspirations over the Mashriq through various means ranging from cultural-economic influence to outright military occupation. Their current ascent comes at the expense of Bilad al-Sham and al-Jazira (the Arab hinterland and the Arabian Peninsula, that is, Saudi Arabia). The web of mutual economic relations – particularly cheap energy supplies from Iran and the lure of huge profits from sanctions busting – overshadows the Sunni-Shiite disputes (that never fade away completely). At the same time, this Tripartite Alliance will also be creating a Sunni majority bloc – Turkey and Egypt – strong enough to contain Iran without alienating it. Turkey and Egypt will thus be able to capitalize on this dynamics to gain the willing subservience of the Sunni Arab world.

In the second half of 2012, however, the US regional policy was dominated by Obama's quest for a historic rapprochement with Iran virtually at all cost. Although secret bilateral negotiations have been going on for a couple of years now – it was only in fall 2012 that a major breakthrough took place during a face-to-face meeting in Doha, Qatar. As first disclosed by former IRGC official turned CIA agent "Reza Kahlili", the Doha meeting was between Obama's senior advisor and closest personal confidant Valerie Jarrett and Khamenei's



confidant and advisor on international affairs Ali Akbar Velayati. Jarrett was born in Shiraz, Iran, where her father managed a hospital, and knew Velayati as a child. The personal trust between Jarrett and Velayati, coupled with her unique personal stature with Obama, delivered the dramatic breakthrough the Obama White House has been yearning for since 2009. Obama's determination to complete the historic rapprochement with Iran overshadows all other US considerations and policies in the Greater Middle East.

Thus, Washington's empowerment of the US-sponsored Tripartite Alliance was dominated by its impact on Obama's quest for a historic rapprochement with Iran. Similarly, the Obama White House continued to support and empower Islamist-Jihadist movements, particularly Ikhwan-affiliated, at the expense of US traditional allies considered anti-Iran including Israel and Saudi Arabia. In fall 2012, the Obama White House was doggedly pursuing a twin-track policy (without declaring it, of course):

1. The preference is a major deal with Iran. Under the conditions of the deal – Iran will retain preeminence/dominance in Syria (albeit without Assad) and Lebanon. Iran will also be a key member of the Tripartite Alliance with Turkey and Egypt which the US will empower over the Greater Middle East. Under such an arrangement there will be no need for Western/NATO military intervention for Iran will “deliver” Assad.
2. If there is no deal with Iran – the US will support (from behind) a Turkey-led NATO military intervention that will overthrow the Assad regime and will empower Islamists-Jihadists affiliated with the Muslim Brothers in Damascus. The crux of the US-sponsored world “recognition” of the new Syrian Council is aimed to build the political justification for such an intervention. Ultimately, the US-led recognition of the Council as the sole representative of the Syrian people precludes negotiations and sets the conditions for a costly and needless military intervention.

With Obama's encouragement, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Ankara has become the dominant power behind the implementation of this strategy in tune with its neo-Ottoman convictions. Historically, the Ottoman Caliphate ruled the huge Mashriq by manipulating a devastated and oppressed Fertile Crescent of Minorities, while domineering the myriad of the Arab tribes, clans and extended families that lived within the Crescent – in al-Jazira. Fractured and devoid of national identities – these localized Arab entities could not resist the Ottoman overlordship. Presently, Ankara's two preconditions for success in Syria and beyond closely resemble the Ottoman legacy: (1) the destruction of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities – the historic buffer between Arab al-Jazira and the outside forces; and (2) the destruction of Mashriq states – mainly Bilad al-Sham. Achieved together, these steps will effectively recreate the traditional socio-political tapestry that served the later-days Ottoman Caliphate (of which British-ruled Egypt was not a part). Indeed, the primary outcome of the fall/winter 2012 phase of the Syrian crisis has been the demise of the modern Syrian state in favor of amalgamation of localized sub-state entities based on tribes and clans that are focused solely on self-preservation and self-survival. And the demise of the Syrian state has already reverberated in Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan.

Meanwhile, the foreign-sponsored Jihadists were focused on the “battles” for Aleppo and Damascus. They exploited the growing reluctance of Assad's Damascus to commit the Syrian military to clashes with rebel forces. In fall/winter 2012, most ground forces activities (with Damascus being the noteworthy exception) were aggressive and preventive foot patrols in contested streets and suburbs by various pro-regime militias (the Alawite Shabiha, HizbAllah-trained Shiite forces, and a myriad of Sunni counterparts) and infantry small units. In cases of opposition attacks, the Syrian military largely preferred to respond with air-power – mainly helicop-



ter strikes but occasionally also bombings by light strike aircraft. Thus, there was very little fighting inside Syria except for recurring acts of terrorism in the Damascus and Aleppo regions. The primary perpetrators of these fighting were Jihadist forces sponsored from across the Turkish border that in Aleppo were joined by local criminal gangs now claiming higher motivations.

However, it took a major humanitarian trauma for the grassroots starting with Eid al-Adha in late-October 2012 and continuing during the winter of 2012/13 to profoundly change of the nature of the war in Syria. The crisis began with the communities' handling of the unprecedented shortages during Eid al-Adha in late-October 2012. Whatever little aid that reached Syria's interior and slums – mainly meat and other foodstuff – was provided to the needy and destitute by non-government Islamist and localized charities. Thus, the quest for solution continued to take place in sub-national framework – urban slums, tribes, extended families – that, in turn, led to the ascent of militant irredentism, secessionism, separatism and sectarianism – all of which breed insurrection, insurgency and terrorism.

During the unusually harsh winter of 2012/13, Jihadist rebels, some controlled by Iran's Quds Forces via Abu-Musab al-Suri, constantly destroyed UN and other international convoys of food and medical supplies ostensibly because the supplies were to be delivered via Damascus and thus were legitimizing the Assad administration. Consequently, the grassroots population not only suffered unprecedented hardships and shortages, but had to endure a discernible increase in the mortality of babies, infants and the elderly. All the while, Arab Satellite TV news channels such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabia continued to report and gloat over the huge sums of money donated by the West to the Syrian opposition in exile. The self-anointed Syrian opposition leaders and their Western allies were shown attending endless conferences and meetings in luxury hotels and resorts all over the world. The stark contrast between their own immense suffering and the opulence of their "leaders" made the grassroots give up on, and begin to profoundly hate, the Western-sponsored so-called opposition. Ultimately, with such prevailing trends the grassroots population could not last for long on its own and survive a harsh winter. Given the destitute of the vast majority of the Syrian grassroots population they were now compelled to seek a source for basic aid and salvation that would not come from the hated and despised Western-sponsored opposition leadership.

Around the turn of 2013, the genuine leaders of both sides were cognizant that the war had long reached a dead end. On-site rebel commanders recognized that the ongoing "bleeding" of their forces by the Syrian security forces in the course of the daily battles was intolerable. The Jihadist forces would have crumbled absent the flow of fighters and supplies from Turkey. Meanwhile, Assad's Damascus also gave up on regaining control of the Syrian hinterland even though one could not claim to be a viable government without controlling such major parts of the country's territory. Hence, both positions indicated to senior Arab diplomats that "fatigue on both sides is peaking and morale is at an all-time low." According to these diplomats, "these factors compel all sides to deal positively with the initiative and to attempt to find a political solution to the crisis." But this was not to be.

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In early 2013, the US-sponsored Tripartite Alliance of Egypt, Turkey and Iran was formally up and running. On February 6, the three presidents – Ahmadi-Nejad, Morsi and Gul – met in Cairo for a formal meeting aside of the OIC summit. The main issue was finding a way to bring about "an immediate settlement of the crisis and an end to the bloodshed in Syria." The three presidents agreed on a plan based on unconditional cessation of hostilities, sending humanitarian aid, lifting all economic sanctions, and facilitating the return of all displaced to



their homes. No mention was made of political negotiations or the fate of the Assad regime. The three presidents also addressed two other regional issues: (1) the growing threat of Israeli bellicosity and aggression; and (2) the deterioration of stability in the Arabian Peninsula and the adverse impact on the regional powers. Ahmadi-Nejad later described the outcome of the trilateral meeting as “very positive.”

Nevertheless, the highest authorities in Tehran launched a major reassessment of the strategic situation in Syria and the entire region in order to formulate Iran’s grand strategic challenges and opportunities. Several leading strategic experts and senior officials were tasked by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei with formulating Iran’s strategy. In the first week of February, the Head of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Saeed Jalili, visited Damascus secretly to discuss the next phases in the crisis and war – including the possibility of a major escalation. Around March 1, Khamenei ordered all of the armed forces and security agency of Iran “to prepare for war” with Israel and the US. Khamenei was convinced that Tehran reached a point of decision in its relations with Washington and that Obama would soon have to either accept Tehran’s demands or go to war as advocated by Israel. Although he hasn’t given up on the rapprochement with Obama, Khamenei was nevertheless determined to be ready for the other possibility as well. Concurrently, Khamenei dispatched his close confidant, Quds Forces commander Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani, to personally make a thorough inspection of the situation in Syria. Soleimani led a small group of Iranian experts on a long tour of all of Syria’s key military and security facilities, as well as the main battle fronts. Soleimani and his delegation also visited the main HizbAllah facilities in Lebanon. Meanwhile, Tehran’s strategic views were being articulated in a series of lectures by leading experts and senior officers to Iranian officers and other defense officials who would be tasked with implementing the new Syrian strategy.

Back on February 13, Mehdi Taeb, the head of Khamenei’s Ammar Strategic Base (Khamenei’s think tank), a former Basij commander, and the brother of IRGC intelligence bureau director Hossein Taeb, delivered a speech at a Basij conference in Mashhad on the importance of Syria to Iran’s national security. Taeb stressed that Syria is an integral part of Iran that is more important to the defense of the Islamic Republic than some of Iran’s traditional parts. “Syria is [Iran’s] 35th province, and it is a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to take Syria or Khuzestan, our top priority will be to preserve Syria. But if we lose the province of Khuzestan [to the Ahwazi Arabs] we could regain it as long as we keep Syria. [Thus,] by preserving Syria, we will be able to retake Khuzestan – but if we lose Syria, we will not be able to preserve Tehran,” Taeb asserted. Taeb told the Basij commanders of their growing role in the Syrian war. “Syria has an army, but it cannot wage the war within Syria’s cities. This is why Iran proposed establishing a Basij force, to conduct the fighting in the cities.” He noted that “the 60,000-strong ‘Syrian Basij’ was established; it has taken over the fighting in the streets from the army.” Taeb expected a growing number of Iranian Basij officers to be soon deployed to Syria in order to assist in training and running the Syrian Basij.

On April 4, IRGC Deputy Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami delivered a lecture to senior officers about Iran’s regional strategy. He stressed that under current circumstances, where Iran is a major regional power, the security borders of Iran exceed by far Iran’s national territory. Iran’s support for Syria and the HizbAllah should be viewed in this context. “We have extended our security borders to the East Mediterranean and their [the US’s and Israel’s] deceptive ploys failed to stop our movement,” Salami stated. The surge westward is an important part of Iran’s ascent as a regional power with global aspirations. “Today, despite sanctions, economic pressures, psychological warfare and cultural invasion, Islamic Iran is advancing, and the people of this land will not allow the enemy to rejoice in exerting pressure,” Salami pointed out. Iran is



expecting sworn enemies led by the US and Israel to resist and fight the ascent of Iran, but “Iran would achieve victory against the enemies under the guidelines of ... Khamenei.” Salami assured his audience that Iran has unique capabilities “to deliver a crushing response to any military strike against the country” and emphasized that “any such measure could result in a war that would spread beyond the Middle East.”

The main decisions Khamenei reached in mid April 2013 were that (1) Iran cannot trust the US to deliver on the Tripartite Alliance or the great rapprochement; and (2) that Iran must be able to preserve and secure its vital strategic interests in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon even if the Assad administration were to profoundly change policy or even collapse. Simply put, the Iranians no longer fully trust Assad’s Damascus to secure their vital interests should Damascus win the war. Tehran is increasingly apprehensive that post-war Assad’s Damascus will follow Moscow’s regional strategy which means return to a de-facto reliance on the Fertile Crescent of the Minorities (or, tacit non-belligerency toward Israel while keeping Iran at arms-length). Tehran is also apprehensive about the possibility that the Islamist-Jihadist leaders, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia might eventually succeed to convince the US to lead a NATO military intervention in Syria that will attempt to empower the Sunni Islamists-Jihadists in a post-Assad Damascus. Either option is unacceptable to Tehran for it harms Iran’s vital interests.

Immediately after Khamenei made his decision, he dispatched very senior emissaries to Beirut to inform HizbAllah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah that Tehran decided to “put all its weight into the ongoing battle in Syria” in order to secure “key advances on the ground within the next two months” – thus guaranteeing Assad’s and Iran’s victory. Khamenei summoned Nasrallah to a highly irregular secret visit to Iran. Meanwhile, the HizbAllah’s most senior commanders were instructed by their Iranian superiors that the HizbAllah should amend the tenet of their doctrine to focusing on fighting a “pre-emptive war that aims to thwart threats before they extend and reach us.” This doctrinal change applies both to the Syrian and Israeli theaters.

The extent of Tehran’s apprehensions and resolve to secure Iran’s vital interests virtually at all cost were articulated during Nasrallah’s emergency visit to Tehran in the last week of April. He and his key aides were instructed by Khamenei, Soleimani and other senior leaders about Iran’s new strategy for Syria and the HizbAllah’s role therein. Nasrallah’s meetings with Khamenei and Soleimani focused on “the strategic vision of the overall situation in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran” given “the convergence of the grand strategic interests of the states of this [Shiite] axis”. The conviction of the upper-most leaders in Tehran, as conveyed by both Khamenei and Soleimani, is that “war with Israel is inevitable” and thus must be launched locally before Israel struck Iran’s national strategic infrastructure – that is, Iran’s nuclear program. According to Nasrallah’s aides, Khamenei decreed that Iran “cannot lose” Syria and nominated Soleimani to ensure that this does not happen whatever the cost.

The crux of the Iranian new strategy is to build into the Iran-led Shiite drive to help the Syrian administration separate capabilities for Shiite forces to take over Syria should Tehran lose confidence in Assad or the US-led West intervenes and threatens Assad. The main instrument is unifying the myriad Shiite forces currently in Syria – mainly Iranian Pasdaran, Basij, Intelligence and Special Forces, HizbAllah forces, Iraqi-Shiite militias (such as the League of the Righteous People and Kataeb HizbAllah), Gulf-Shiite militias and Pakistani-Shiite militias – along with the Syrian Shiite-Alawite militias, Gendarmerie and Basij-type units created by the Iranians and the HizbAllah into a single Iranian “Army” with a coherent High Command and its own command and control system. The HizbAllah was briefed that the “Army” is already 150,000-200,000 troops strong. Soleimani is personally in command of this “Army” in addition to his role in the Quds Forces.



The growing strategic importance of creating grassroots Shiite presence in Syria was articulated by the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Hassan Firouzabadi. On May 10, he delivered a lecture to IRGC senior officers that included an assessment of the situation in Syria. Firouzabadi said that a primary reason for the success of the Syrian Armed Forces in the current phase of the fighting is that “a HizbAllah-style resistance movement has emerged in Syria.” There is an irreversible turning point in the war in Syria. Firouzabadi explained that “the resistance in Syria has emerged triumphant owing to Assad’s prudence in dealing with the extremist groups and the hegemonic powers as well as the Syrian nation’s support for him.” Most important is Assad’s success in building a militant popular support base. “Thanks to Bashar al-Assad’s strategic role, a popular resistance with the same nature as that of Lebanon’s HizbAllah has taken shape across Syria and is solidifying,” Firouzabadi emphasized. As far as Firouzabadi is concerned, “the war in Syria has come to an end. Therefore, the enemies had better not interfere in Syria’s affairs anymore.”

Meanwhile, despite the publicly stated commitment to Assad’s Damascus, Tehran is also busy organizing Shiite volunteers and expeditionary forces in Iran, Iraq and Pakistan in order to rush reinforcements once the “Army” has to confront Syrian and/or Western forces. Nasrallah was told that Tehran is ready to commit some 500,000 Shiite fighters and unlimited resources into the war to secure Shiite dominance over Syria and Lebanon. Tehran is convinced that Maliki’s Baghdad will also commit forces and resources to the securing of the Shiite access to the Mediterranean. Returning to Beirut, Nasrallah and his key aides emphasized that Khamenei and the uppermost leaders in Tehran are dead serious about seizing control over Syria and Lebanon should the need arise. Furthermore, Nasrallah’s aides asserted that if pushed to the corner – Tehran will not hesitate to make use of its “ultimate/dooms-day deterrence capabilities” rather than lose Syria and Lebanon.

Khamenei’s sense of urgency, as reflected during Nasrallah’s visit, was the manifestation of escalating tension between Damascus and Tehran despite the latter’s all out support for the survival of the former. In late April and early May, the situation has become inherently explosive because of the profound transformation of relations happening under the surface and behind the close military cooperation.

Since the consolidation of the Hafiz al-Assad regime in the early 1980’s (post-Hama and post-Lebanon war) and until very recently – the Assads’ Damascus was the dominant power in the Levant. That is, Tehran was dependent on the good will and cooperation of the Assads’ Damascus in order to reach the shores of the Mediterranean and sustain the vital links with the HizbAllah. In spring 2013, as a consequence of the decisive role of Iranian-HizbAllah elements and supplies in facilitating the Syrian strategic successes, Tehran decided that Bashar al-Assad’s Damascus now depends on Tehran for survival, and that the strategic relationship along the shores of the Mediterranean should reflect this new reality. In practical terms, Tehran insists that key Syrian strategic-military undertakings – from permitting Iranian supplies to the HizbAllah via Syrian seaports to take precedent over Russian naval activities, to handing over strategic weaponry to the HizbAllah despite promises to Israel to the contrary - be undertaken as dictated by Tehran.

Assad’s Damascus does not see it this way and does not believe that the Iranian support warrants the subjugation of Damascus to Tehran. Moreover, an integral part of the Iranian-HizbAllah operations in shielding western Syria from Lebanon-based Sunni Jihadist forces has been the concurrent Shiitization of southern Alawite villages in the areas where the Iranian-HizbAllah forces operate. And this reality is infuriating Assad’s Alawite core supporters. Damascus is cognizant that Tehran cannot afford to have the Shiite on-land access to the Levant and the HizbAllah be cut by Turkey-sponsored Sunni Jihadists. Hence, Tehran and its proxies will continue to invest everything possible in sustaining the Assad administration and help winning the war for Assad’s



Damascus. But both sides – Tehran and Damascus – are cognizant that the crucial issue of the packing order of the key powers in the Levant will have to be decisively resolved sooner or later. Posturing has already begun under the surface.

Israel's bombing in early May of several military facilities in Damascus was first and foremost a swift destruction of long-range missiles about to be handed over to the HizbAllah. However, some of these facilities, in the Mt. Qassioun area, were of importance to Assad's own survival, and they were hit solely because this was where the missiles were being stored and prepared for delivery. Hence, the bombing also constituted a message from Jerusalem to both Tehran and Damascus that Jerusalem will not permit drastic change in the rules of the game regarding who's the boss in Syria. As far as Jerusalem is concerned, Assad remains the boss in Damascus and Tehran should accept this.

In retrospect, Tehran's growing apprehension starting early spring 2013 was also reflected in the growing involvement of Iranian intelligence with the Sunni Jihadist forces even though they are fighting major allies of Iran including Assad, Maliki, and the HizbAllah. Back in winter 2013, opposition leaders in the deep interior warned that some of the most prominent Jihadist forces, or at least major components thereof, were cooperating with Abu-Musab al-Suri and Iran-based senior commanders. Among these forces were the al-Faruq Forces or Brigades, Jabhat al-Nusrah and other al-Qaida-affiliates. Growing numbers of Syrian and foreign Jihadists commanders were arriving in Syria from Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iraq via Iran – bringing with them large sums of money and weapons. Moreover, several local-nationalist opposition networks were betrayed to the Syrian security forces by Jihadists – causing irreparable damage to the indigenous internal operations.

In the second half of February the Jihadist high command consolidated a centralized strategic command structure of the Jihadist forces in northern al-Jazira. The new command covers an east-to-west strip of more than 500 miles – from the western suburbs of Baghdad to Damascus and on to Ein Hilweh near the shores of the Mediterranean in southern Lebanon. The command also covers northern Iraq and Syria, where most of the fighting is taking place, as well as northern and central Jordan.

The main tasks of the new Jihadist command are guided and controlled by a Shurah of senior commanders and spiritual guides. At first, the Shurah did not seem to have a discernable chief, and the activities of this command were limited to strategic-political guidance, theological guidance (that manifests itself in sermons and communiqués), logistical and financial support, weapon transfers, and, more recently, the transfer of commanders and elite forces throughout the theater. The Shurah did not have supervision or command authority over the daily fighting and other activities of the various Jihadist Kitaeb operating in northwestern Syria and central Iraq.

Although some of these Jihadist forces are engaged in various anti-Shiite operations – including slaughter of Arab and Iranian pilgrims – there exist coordination and communication between the Jihadist Shurah and IRGC Intelligence via the Quds Forces and the "al-Qaida" command center in Iran. There is strong indication that Abu-Musab al-Suri, Shawqi al-Islambouli, and several other Jihadist luminaries associated with the Quds Forces communicate routinely with the new Shurah. The messages from Iran reflected the determination of the Jihadist supreme leadership to transform the ongoing crises into a strategic campaign that will most likely escalate into the long-sought onslaught on Islam's three holiest shrines in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem.

In late March, the regional Shurah was further consolidated and refined in a "summit meeting" taking place in the Lebanon-Syria border area not far from Tripoli. Senior Jihadist commanders from Egypt, the Sinai, Gaza,



Jordan, Syria, Iraq and North Lebanon gathered to plan for the coming fighting season. Senior representatives from Qatari and Libyan intelligence were also present. As well, Iranian and Turkish senior intelligence officials were hovering in the flanks of this gathering but do not participate. This meeting came in the aftermath of a few high-level meetings in Qatar, Libya and Turkey that discussed Jihadist-sponsorship policies of the three countries particularly regarding Syria and the Gaza Strip. The Jihadist commanders recognized that they could not topple the Assad administration, and that a regional war leading to a Western intervention is their only way to get to Damascus and then to Jerusalem, Mecca and Medina. The Jihadists strategized in this vane.

Concurrently, there has also been a profound change in the fighting throughout Syria. In early April, the Syrian military launched a complex strategic offensive under the command of Maher al-Assad. The primary objective of the offensive was to roll back recent rebel gains made possible by the flow of trained reinforcements and new weapons from Turkey. The main offensive was preceded by a series of commando raids and ambushes along and across the Lebanese border. Syrian and HizbAllah detachments hit several Jihadist encampments and weapon storage sites earmarked for reinforcing the Damascus-area Jihadists. The ambushes blocked the main approaches to Damascus.

The initial focus of the main offensive was in the greater Damascus area. Syrian military activities were characterized by high-tempo offensive operations, high-quality pincer operations, and deep raids. In the other main cities – Homs, Idlib, Hama and southwest of Aleppo – the pace of operations slowed down as greater ground forces units were committed to battle. The Syrian military was running there determined set-piece operations. The local commanders obviously lacked the newly discovered skill and flexibility of their Damascus-area counterparts. Massive use of artillery and some commando raids supplemented the steady advance. Overall, Damascus demonstrated new resolve and vastly improved military capabilities – consolidating assertive combat operations in the major cities into a coherent strategic offensive.

Overall, the rebels were on the defensive. After a couple of weeks, the Syrian military offensive was progressing rather well, though fairly slowly. Former Syrian senior officers with the opposition in Turkey expected the Syrian military to move faster. They acknowledge that the rebel forces were suffering major setbacks, that the noose around their urban strongholds was tightening, and that the isolating of the main theaters in western Syria from the cross-border safe-havens was having a major impact on the rebels' overall posture. The only hope of the rebels was to hold long enough until the US-led West intervenes and save them. Both Syrian senior military officers and the former senior officers agreed that should the Syrian military campaign continued to evolve – it would be virtually impossible for the rebels to recover. Moreover, given the extent of the casualties already suffered by the rebels in the urban centers of western Syria – only a major influx of forces and weapons from across the borders would be able to resurrect the revolt even if the Syrian offensive was brought to a sudden halt.

By late April, the Syrian offensive focused on isolating the main cities along the Damascus -Aleppo highway from both Turkey and Lebanon. The Syrian military and the HizbAllah decided not attempt to complete the clean-up of the cities before they were certain that no reinforcements and supplies would arrive during the decisive fighting. Syrian forces now had better mobility, were better trained to use helicopters and air support. Most important, they were provided with excellent and timely intelligence by the local population and proved capable of exploiting it accurately, quickly and relatively cleanly (that is, with minimal collateral casualties and damage).



In mid-May, the Syrian military with HizbAllah forces completed the occupation of Qusayr and quickly redeployed in order to complete the stifling of the Jihadist pockets in Homs. The assault followed two weeks of preparatory Syrian-HizbAllah operations that isolated Qusayr from both Hermel, Lebanon, and the Syrian countryside. The occupation of Qusayr is a major strategic victory for Assad's Damascus. The Syrian and HizbAllah forces effectively put an end to the Jihadists' ability to infiltrate weapons and reinforcements from Lebanon while the reverse route to the Sunni Jihadist bases in northeastern Lebanon – from Hermel to Tripoli – is open for the HizbAllah to exploit. It is now only a question of time before the Syrian and allied forces complete the occupation of Homs and Hama because the remaining Jihadist forces in both towns have long been completely dependent on supplies and reinforcements from Lebanon. Some of the hard-core Islamist urban slums of Homs are densely built. Hence, massive use of artillery fire can be expected.

The Syrian victory in the Qusayr-Homs-Hama area left meaningful Jihadist presence only in the Aleppo and Idlib areas. However, the predominantly-Jihadist rebel forces in these areas are completely dependent on the flow of supplies and forces from southern Turkey. The sustenance of their operations in Aleppo and Idlib will have a huge political price for Erdogan's Ankara. Damascus will now be in position to contrast between the subsiding violence throughout Syria and the sustained violence near the Turkish border, and thus convincingly argue that only the cross-border sustenance of the Jihadists keeps the fighting going.

Meanwhile, starting 23 May, Tehran and Baghdad enabled sizeable Iraqi Sunni Jihadist forces to reinforce the so-called "al-Qaida-affiliated" Syrian and foreign Jihadist forces in central Syria, mainly in Deir-az-Zawur and Jabhat al-Nusrah-controlled Ar-Raqqah. This surge further integrated the Jihadist forces in the entire al-Jazira – making future division of al-Jazira along the old Syrian-Iraqi border impossible. This surge aimed to help the key elements of Jabhat al-Nusrah and other so-called "al-Qaida-affiliated" Syrian, Iraqi and foreign Jihadist forces controlled by the Quds Forces via Abu-Musab al-Suri and his group of senior Jihadist commanders. As the Syrian military forces and their Iranian, HizbAllah and other Shiite allies consolidate control over the western parts of Syria – the Iran-dominated Sunni Jihadists consolidate control over the predominantly-Sunni central parts of Syria (south of the Kurdish zone). These forces do not have to endorse Assad's Damascus – they have to, and they DO, reject the foreign-based Western-endorsed opposition.

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Ultimately, however, the real key to the strategic success of Assad's Damascus is the profound transformation of Syrian society during the spring of 2013. These grassroots changes make the military victories of the Syrian military and their allies all but irreversible – thus sustaining the Assad administration quite safely in Damascus.

First indications of the major shift came in mid-April. For example, when Jihadist forces attempted to consolidate control over oil-rich eastern Syria – the local Masrib tribesmen asked the Assad administration for Syrian military help against Jabhat al-Nusrah and other Jihadist forces. The center of the clash was in the township of Masrib in the Deir al-Zor province where clashes between tribal militias and Jihadist forces had been escalating since late March. In mid-April, the tribal forces in the Masrib area found themselves incapable of resisting the better armed and trained Jihadist forces and appealed to Damascus for help from the Syrian military. The Jabhat al-Nusrah forces retaliated by blowing up 30 houses in Masrib and killing their inhabitants. The Syrian military provided large quantities of weapons and ammunition to the tribal militias – enabling them to successfully attack the Jabhat al-Nusrah and other Jihadist forces. The tribal forces reported killing 17 Jihadists, including 4 foreign volunteers.



The Masrib incident was the first confirmed case where major “neutral” tribal forces changed sides and joined Assad’s Damascus in order to be able to withstand and resist Jihadist onslaught. Since then, a large number of local and tribal militias asked Assad’s Damascus for weapons, and escalated their fighting against the Jihadist forces encroaching on tribal habitats and attempting to enforce neo-Salafism. The number of armed clashes between local militias and Jihadist forces keeps growing. The “neutral” segment – about 60% of the Syrian population – hated Assad but dreads the Jihadists even more. Once the “neutrals” realized that the only way to persevere and preserve their traditional tribal way of life against the Jihadist imposition of neo-Salafism was joining forces with the Assad regime – they did. This development – rather than any military victory by the Assad military – is the key to Assad’s triumph. In early summer, the Assad administration is getting very close to this point.

By mid-May, information collected by various UN-affiliated humanitarian entities also confirmed that there has been a profound change in the popular attitude of the Syrian population in recent months. These unofficial conclusions are based on the aggregate data collected by the UN personnel as they have been dispensing food and humanitarian aid throughout Syria rather than a scientific polling. Still, the numbers are so distinct – they merit attention. According to the data, 70% of Syrians now support the Assad administration, 20% are “neutral” and want to be left alone, and only 10% support the Jihadists and other rebels. This means that the majority of the 60% of the “neutrals” decided that the Jihadist threat was so great it merited a Faustian deal with the Assad administration. This trend has been noticed throughout Syria since early 2013, but the data suggests that a large number of the “neutrals” have already taken side.

The UN field people cite numerous grassroots leaders – all Sunni Arabs – explaining that it was possible to live quietly under the Assad regime for as long as one did not conspire against Damascus and that it was possible to resolve misunderstandings with talks and bribery, while the Jihadists impose themselves on every aspect of life and there is nobody to talk to. Moreover, the plight and destitute of the winter of 2012/13 convinced the vast majority of Sunni Arabs that international humanitarian aid would reach them only if the Jihadist were defeated and that only the Syrian military could accomplish this. Hence, ever greater segments of the population yearn to return to the Assad days imperfect as they were. This is exactly what happened in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus in the early-to-mid 2000’s. Having to choose between Chechenization imposing Arab-Islamist way of life and retaining their Sufi traditions while living under Moscow’s Ramzan Kadyrov – the population overwhelmingly opted for the latter. Bashar al-Assad, like Ramzan Kadyrov, is not going anywhere because his people prefer him, imperfect as he is, to any alternate leader the Jihadists offer.

Consequently, the case made by Assad’s Damascus that the sole remaining fighting are the Western- and Qatari-sponsored Jihadists operating from across the Turkish border in the Idlib and Aleppo areas will now be even stronger and clearer. Moreover, there is now a systemic and fairly organized weapons and resources distribution inside Syria that delivers weapons and funds solely to Jihadist hands. The attempt to control from Turkey or Jordan who gets weapons – that is, FSA-affiliates – is an exercise in futility. FSA commanders in Turkey are intentionally obfuscating, if not lying, about their associations and affiliations inside. Hence, the ability of “the international community” to impose an anti-Assad political solution on Syria has already been nixed by the grim realities on the ground.

In late May 2013, the collapse of the Syrian revolt has become apparent even as the West is desperately trying to avert the opposition’s defeat through political negotiations. The West-supported self-anointed Syrian opposition leadership, the National Coalition, fails to agree whether to join the proposed peace conference but



keeps insisting that Bashar al-Assad must be removed as a precondition. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary Movement in Syria which represents the remaining nationalist opposition forces in the interior issued a communique stressing that the National Coalition has failed to represent the Syrian people and their struggle, and thus “have no real impact on the revolution”. Concurrently, while pleading for massive weapons supplies from the West, FSA Chief Salim Idriss issued an ultimatum to the HizbAllah to withdraw from Syria or the FSA “will take all measures to hunt [them] even in hell.” In contrast, the Syrian military, with over two-thirds of its officers and troops Sunni Arabs, has remained a cohesive and effective fighting machine.

Comes summer – Ankara, Doha, Washington and their allies will have to choose between accepting defeat in Syria and the victory of the Assad administration, and between sponsoring a major cross-border escalation and surge into Syria that, irrespective of its outcome, will be Turkish and allied intervention in all but name. Moreover, it will be politically nearly impossible for the US-led West/NATO not to intervene should this surge be defeated by Damascus and its allies. Furthermore, with Turkey’s cross-border intervention no longer deniable – Damascus and its allies will be in position to unleash Turkey’s oppressed minorities starting with the Alawites/Alavis in the areas from where the Jihadists operate and bringing in the Kurds (not to be forgotten the bulk of the PKK fighters leaving Turkey these days relocate to camps west of Lake Urmia, in northwestern Iran, controlled by the Quds Forces). It will be impossible for Erdogan’s Turkish military, emaciated as it is by the purge of Westernized officers, to stem the tide.

Alas, as I’ve written in earlier ISPSW papers², the historic-regional mega-trends dominate the course of the crisis in Bilad al-Sham and the entire Mashriq. Neither the complexities of the inner-Syrian struggle and the awakening of the deep interior, nor the travesty of the advocated foreign intervention should distract from the overall historic context of the crisis. The key to the future of the region is the Fertile Crescent of Minorities (from east to west: Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds, Alawites, Druze, Maronites, Jews and Circassians), and especially their Levant section, because they constitute a buffer between the Arab Islamist upsurge and the hegemonic ascent of the Islamist outside powers – Turkey, Egypt and Iran. Only a viable Fertile Crescent of Minorities – of which the Alawites and Druze of Syria are presently the most beleaguered elements – can prevent the simmering Arab Middle East from conjoining with the Islamist-Jihadist ascent of neo-Ottoman Turkey, Ikhwanī Egypt and Mahdivist Iran – thus jointly creating an explosive critical mass. By then, the modern Arab states will have succumbed to fracturing along ethno-tribal lines – thus subjugating the entire al-Jazira to the dominance of the Islamist Tripartite Alliance.

Hence, the main quandary facing the international community is not whether Bashar al-Assad the individual remains in power, nor is it whether “his” administration survives the upheaval. The main challenge in resolving the Syria crisis is preventing the replacement of an Alawite-Druze dominated government by an Islamist-Jihadist regime. No less important is the imperative to restore and preserve a viable modern Syrian state via meaningful political reforms, as well as economic recovery and modernization. It is still possible to negotiate with the Assad inner-circle the establishment of a nationalist government in Damascus with emphasis on regionalization and diffusion of power that will ensure the rights of the Sunni Arab tribes, extended families and urban elite, as well as the nation’s minorities. Only the transformation of Syria through such negotiations will ensure that all pertinent international agreements Syria is beholden to will remain valid. Ultimately, the

² I’ve written 15 papers for the ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security during 2011-12 covering the evolution of the crisis in the Middle East. Of special relevance here are Yossef Bodansky, A Heretic’s Musings on Syria in Lieu of Libya, ISPSW, August 2011; and Yossef Bodansky, A Heretic’s Up-Dated Musings on Syria, ISPSW, April 2012.



restoration of Syria as a key to the Fertile Crescent of Minorities remains the real vital interest of the West.

Thus, in addressing the turmoil in Syria special attention must be paid not to throw out the baby (Alawite-Druze preeminence) with the bath water (ending the fratricidal violence). Democratic reforms must acknowledge the country's Sunni majority and diversity of character and interests, but not at the expense of the minorities. The marginalization and destruction of the Syrian section of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, even if in the name of democracy, not only will not elevate the Sunni majority but will cause cataclysmic upheaval throughout the greater Middle East.

There are no instant-gratification panacea solutions to the Syrian crisis. Western leaders must resist the temptation to seek such solutions just because there are ugly images of violence on the satellite TV news. The Arab Middle East, of which Syria is a crucial component, is currently experiencing a peak in a historic convulsion spanning a quarter of a millennium. Ultimately, the Arab Middle East will have to find their own solution for their own problem. Action by the West is not a guarantee for conflict resolution. Western military intervention is more likely to spark a cataclysmic eruption that will set the region aflame than help alleviate the crisis. Western leaders should internalize what Albert Einstein said: "If I had one hour to save the world, I would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and only five minutes finding the solution."

APPENDIX:

The View From Moscow

In late-April 2013, Russian experts who interact with the upper-most leaders in Damascus concluded that the day-to-day fighting do not constitute the primary yardstick for determining the state of the Assad administration. The two main indicators are related to the fiber of key segments of the population.

1. The minorities – Alawites, Druze, Orthodox Christians, Armenians, Aramaics and Shiite Arabs – are all siding with Assad's Damascus and are formulating their communal long-term plans on the assumption that Assad is going to win the war. This reinvigorated confidence is manifesting itself in the resilience of society and the military, as well as in the military's assertiveness. (The only minority that is not part of this dynamics are the Kurds who are fixated with the consolidating of their Kurdish State that effectively seceded from both Iraq and Syria. The Kurds are pursuing their own interests and do NOT cooperate with the rebels.)
2. The "neutral majority" – the tribal, rural and urban clan Sunni Arabs – has given up on the ability of the Islamist-Jihadist rebels to topple the Assad regime. Hence, this tormented yet silent majority is adamant on NOT antagonizing the Syrian military and security forces. They are inclined to make localized live-and-let-live deals with the government, no longer object to their sons joining the military and security forces if they want to, and even pick up arms against rebel forces encroaching into their native zones. With this development, Damascus no longer fears that the Islamist-Jihadist insurrection could transform into a genuine popular revolt.



That said, the Russian experts concurred that cessation of the actual fighting is nowhere to be seen. The Islamist-Jihadist forces seek to topple the Assad administration and establish an Islamic State in Damascus that would serve as the springboard for a regional Jihad. They do not seek to win over the traditionalist-conservative Sunni Arab grassroots. With an unabated, and even growing, flow of weapons, funds and Jihadist volunteers pouring in from all over the Muslim World and the West – there is no reason why the Islamist-Jihadist forces should cease fighting. Their leaders, however, are cognizant that they will not be able to topple the Assad administration on their own – and therefore will attempt to induce the West into a Libya-style intervention by provoking a humanitarian catastrophe. Meanwhile, since Iran, its allies and proxies, consider sustaining their access to, and foothold in, Syria and the Levant a vital interest – they will also continue to pour resources and troops into the fighting on Assad's side. This will also contribute to prolonging the fighting and carnage.

The Russian experts cautiously note the buds of what might become a profound change in Iran's grand strategy. The Russians believe that there are faint indications of the revival of Tehran's historic Persian-Shiite world-view and the beginning of the decline of the Khomeinist-Mahdist doctrine dominating the Islamic Republic. The historic Persian-Shiite world-view considered the Shiites, and particularly the Persians, a persecuted minority in a greater Middle East dominated by Sunnis. Therefore, as demonstrated in the Shah's days, Iran reached out to other non-Sunni minorities in the greater Middle East – particularly Israel – in order to consolidate an alliance against their common Sunni foes – Arabs and Turks. After the Islamic Revolution, Tehran committed to an assertive Islamist-Jihadist strategy based on leading an all-Islamic Jihad aimed to jointly liberate the Muslim world from foreign dominance and influence.

In this spirit, Iran recently entertained the idea of joining the Tripartite Alliance with Egypt and Turkey. Although the three powers are closely cooperating against common foes – be it Saudi Arabia or Israel – there emerged unease in Iran regarding the overtly Sunni character of Ikhwani Egypt and neo-Ottoman Turkey. The Russian experts contend that the upper-most leaders are still pondering the remote possibility of Iran changing course. However, they emphasize the significance of recent public statements against Holocaust denial and the softening of tone toward Israel. To the Russians, this development serves as an important indication that Tehran is reconsidering a return to the minorities' camp – in which Israel is a key leading player – and abandoning the all-Islamic Tripartite Alliance. Iran's reaching out to the PKK Kurds is also a profound change of policy given Iran's bitter war with PEJAK (the PKK's Iran-based sister organization). Hence, such a change in Iran's world-view will have dramatic impact on the course of the war in and around Syria.

* An earlier version of this paper was published as a *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*

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