

Damascus Government Locked into a Cycle of Violence Fed by the Self-styled “Friends of Syria”

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Tension between Turkey and Syria along their border is edging closer to flashpoint. Last week a Turkish air force jet was shot down after violating Syrian air space. The Syrian government said the plane was hit while inside Syrian air space. Turkey says it had already left Syrian air space and was hit in international air space.

What the plane was doing inside Syrian air space is another matter. Turkey’s President, Abdullah Gul, said it had ‘strayed’ off course. Other accounts suggest that it was there to ‘light up’ Syria’s radar system or test its missile defences. Turkey immediately sent troops and armor to the border and invoked Article 4 of the NATO Charter, calling for consultation with its partners in the alliance. They immediately endorsed the Turkish version. Hillary Clinton called the shooting down of the plane ‘brazen’ while William Hague thought it was ‘outrageous’, words, one cannot help noting, that they have never used to describe the missile attacks by their armed forces that have killed civilians in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya. Another ‘incident’ might lead to Turkey invoking Article 5, the common defence article of the NATO Charter, which regards an attack on one member as an attack on all. War between Syria and Turkey would then become war between Syria and all NATO members, leading in turn to confrontation between the NATO/Gulf state bloc on one hand and Russia, China, Iran and their allies on the other.

There is nothing accidental or unwilling about what is happening in Syria. The government in Damascus has been deliberately locked into a cycle of violence fed from the outside by the self-styled ‘Friends of Syria’. Both sides are implicated in the killing of civilians yet the mainstream media has created a narrative in which virtually all the killing is the work of the army or the ‘regime loyalists’ known as the shabiha.

‘Activists’ routinely blame every murder, bombing and act of sabotage on the government even when the victims have been Baath loyalists (as was the professor murdered by armed men in her home on the outskirts of Homs in late June, along with her three children and parents). The suffering of families whose menfolk have been killed after taking up arms against the government is reported in the media but not the suffering of families who have lost members to the armed groups. The jury remains out on the Houla massacre. While the UN Human Rights Council says in its latest report that ‘many’ of the killings ‘may’ have been the work of regime loyalists, other evidence points to the massacre having been the handiwork of jihadis, reportedly including the Faruq Brigade of the so-called Free Syrian Army. As the Human Rights Council admits that it has no conclusive evidence as to who was behind this massacre it might have been more responsible for it say nothing unless and until it did have such evidence.

This unbalanced narrative feeds into the war strategies being framed by the 'Friends of Syria'. These 'friends' insist that the armed campaign they are sponsoring is directed against the government and not the people. What 'the people' - by any measure the majority of Syrians - want is hard to gauge amidst such chaos but evidence suggests they see these 'friends' as their enemies. The referendum in February and the elections in May were hardly perfect but remain the clearest indications yet of general support amongst Syrians for a political solution to the crisis gripping their country. Outside the enclaves dominated by the armed groups, the people are strongly opposed to these groups and their external backers, knowing that but for the obstruction of Russia and China, NATO warplanes would have been bombing their country long ago.

Outside governments have fastened on Syria's problems with the tenacity of leeches. The 'Arab spring' created the opportunity to reshape the Middle East at its political and geographical centre and they have seized it. Although paying lip service to Kofi Annan's ceasefire plan they are prolonging the violence in the hope that the army will eventually disintegrate and the government implode. While the destruction of the government in Damascus is an end in itself, Syria must also be seen as a way station on the road to Iran.

If the Baath government can be brought down, the strategic alliance between Iran, Syria and Hizbullah will collapse at the centre. Even if the government is not dislodged, Syria will be in such chaos that it would be unable respond if Iran is attacked. Hizbullah would be similarly immobilized. Israel would be able to attack without having to worry about a second front opening up across its northern armistice lines. President Putin's assurance while on an apparently unscheduled visit to Israel that Iran will not develop a nuclear weapon may have been a last ditch attempt to ward off an attack on Iran. Perhaps Russian intelligence has found out that a decision has finally been taken and the date and time set.

Turkey's initial response to the 'Arab spring' was sluggish. The Tunisian president was gone before the government had time to react. It waited almost until the end before calling on Mubarak to step down. Prime Minister Erdogan spoke strongly against military intervention anywhere in the region before coming in behind the armed attack on Libya. On Syria he and his Foreign Minister claimed to have given President Bashar al Assad good advice which he refused to take before deciding that he had to go. In late summer they threw their government weight behind the establishment both of the 'Syrian National Council' (SNC) and the 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA), giving the first a home in Istanbul and the second sanctuary in southeastern Turkey. For the first time in Turkey's republican history a government had committed itself to 'regime change' in a neighboring country; for the first time a government had sponsored an armed group operating across its border to kill the citizens of a neighboring country. Even now the moral and legal implications of this policy have scarcely been touched upon in the Turkish media.

For a country which has a long history of other governments meddling in its affairs the Turkish position is almost surreal. This is not just because of the parallel between the PKK and the FSA, both crossing the borders of neighboring countries to kill the citizens of their own country; both claiming to be fighting in the name of human rights and freedom; and both regarded as terrorist organizations by the governments of the countries in which they are operating. The history of external meddling and support for rebels by outside governments goes deep into the history of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, from the support for the Greek rebels in the 1820s, to support for the Bulgarian rebels in the 1870s and Macedonian and Armenian rebels in the 1890s. Intervention in the name of civilization

was replaced in the 20th century by intervention in the name of democracy and freedom and now we have intervention in the name of humanitarian concern – a continuing theme through these two centuries – and the ‘responsibility to protect’. In a paradoxical play on history, Turkey is now intervening in Syria as the imperial powers once intervened in the Ottoman Empire and as they are still intervening in the affairs of other countries.

Other agendas are easy to see. Saudi Arabia wanted the US to attack Iran during the George W. Bush presidency and ‘cut the head off the snake’. Its interests are partly ideological, directed against Shiism in general as well as Iran in particular, while also arising from the traditional Saudi fear of its large northern neighbor. The US put the Syrian government on its list of states that support terrorism in 1979 and since the introduction of SALSA (Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Act of 2003) has gradually tightened economic sanctions in an effort to bring the government to its knees. For Israel Syria has always been the visceral Arab enemy and of course, what Israel wants, any US administration will do its best to deliver. Turmoil in the Arab world suits Israel down to the ground, literally. It is tightening its hold on all the territories occupied in 1967 all the time without the world paying any attention because of the drama of the ‘Arab spring’. Not that the world has ever paid much attention but for the moment Israel is having a dream run.

The one agenda that is difficult to determine is Turkey’s. It has the approval of its partners inside NATO and the collective known as the ‘Friends of Syria’ but this has come at a heavy price. Cross-border trade in the southeast has all but collapsed. Relations with Iran, Iraq and Russia have been undermined. Perceptions of government sympathy for a Muslim Brotherhood-type government in Syria have aroused the suspicions of Turkish Alevis, especially in the border province of Hatay, where the population is about 50 per cent Alevi. The region was severed from Syria by the French in 1938 and handed to Turkey. Both Alevis and Christians still have family ties across the border and both see the Assad government as an effective guarantor of minority rights. They certainly do not share their own government’s perspective.

What is being played out is one of the greatest power games since the end of the First World War. Behind the cover of the ‘Arab spring’ the obstacles to renewed western domination of the region are being removed one by one. The destabilization of Syria is bringing the region close to a war with potentially catastrophic global repercussions but the rewards are so great that the western coalition cannot help itself from pressing against all red lines. Turkey’s involvement is central to western strategic planning and if war does come either through accident or design Turkey will be right on the front line. A recent poll carried out by the Centre for Economic and Foreign Policy Research shows strong opposition to any deeper involvement in the Syrian crisis. The majority of those polled (56 per cent) do not support military intervention in Syria and only a small number (less than eight per cent) support the arming of the Syrian opposition. The question here is whether the Turkish people realize how deeply their government is already involved. The ruling party dominates parliament but Syria might yet prove to be its Achilles heel.

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