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Position Paper

Three Prominent Developments in the Syrian Crisis



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With the passing of the twenty-ninth week, the extensive confrontation between the Syrian people and the ruling regime witnessed three highly important developments that will have profound impact on the crisis that Syria faces:

1. The increase of dissent in the Arab Syrian army and the tendency of dissident officers and soldiers to engage in armed confrontation with security and army forces that attack civilians and protestors in Syrian cities and town;
2. The exacerbation of the regime's economic and financial crisis;
3. The success of the national council held in Istanbul to expand its circle of membership and include the larger sector of Syrian opposition forces in the country and abroad.

The following is an attempt to peruse all of these important developments and their outcomes in the context of the Syrian revolution and the crisis harming the country.

Division and Armed Engagement

Since midsummer, the Syrian armed uprising has witnessed various signs of an approach to arms against security and army forces though this approach remained limited to small groups of Syrians that were driven by motives of revenge and anger. However, armed clashes that erupted since security and army forces attempted to storm Rastan on 27 September, and lasted four days, clearly indicate the significance of militarization in the Syrian popular uprising. As a matter of fact, the attacking forces were ultimately unable to storm the city until they mobilized hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles and forcefully destructed it and its residents' homes. Reports of opposition circles point out that the number of deaths exceeded a hundred.

Rastan and its tribal environment are considered a distinctive area in terms of their relations with the Syrian army as reports evoke that at least 17,000 military officers and soldiers come from the city and its vicinities which makes them one of the most important human supplies of the Syrian army. Surely, the armed constituents that encountered the storming of Rastan belong mainly to what is known as the Free Syrian Army that is composed of soldiers and officers that dissented in the past few months, deciding to surrender to brigades organized for the protection of the people from the attacks of army and security forces and the regime's repressive militias. Considering the exceptional relations between Rastan and the army, and the large number of dissidents from the army that come from this city, perhaps it was its choice to show the Free Syrian Army's capacity to confront a regional matter.

It appears that there are indications that armed confrontation is not limited to Rastan as similar, albeit smaller, confrontations erupted in Hama and other parts of Syria especially in the rural areas of Damascus and Idlib and the Syrian-Lebanese borders. Some clashes resulted from attacks planned by armed groups while others resulted from the army's attacks on sites it believes dissidents barricade themselves in. Still others erupted unexpectedly due to more dissent in the army.

Although the regime's media outlets have promoted the idea of presence of armed terrorist groups active all over the country since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, this claim actually seeks to justify the operations of killing and bloody repression the regime exercises against protesting masses. In fact, the Syrian protest movement was commenced peacefully and its major manifestations remain as such. The critical variable in the popular uprising was the dissent movement of officers and soldiers whose consciences could not bear the moral and religious burdens of killing their own people.

Publicized dissent from the army began with the abandonment of First Lieutenant Abdul Razzaq Mohammed Tallas on 6 June. Three days later, Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmoush dissented as well, and his recent arrest by Syrian intelligence caused a large amount of controversy. On 3 August, Colonel Riyad al-Asad, the highest ranking of the

dissidents, issued the first declaration of the Free Syrian Army in which he indicates the dissident soldiers' orientation towards organizing themselves.

According to Colonel al-Asad's statements (Reuters, 30 September), the number of dissociated officers and soldiers that joined the Free Syrian Army amounts to ten thousand. This, of course, is a large number and there is no way of substantiating it. Still, other estimates indicate that the number is actually no more than a couple hundred joined by another couple hundred trained civilians. However, it may be that the total number of dissident officers and soldiers has in fact reached thousands but not all of them have decided to join the Free Syrian Army yet.

In Syria, as in most parts of the Arab world, it is not difficult to obtain weaponry especially if insurgents were officers and soldiers that just recently left the armed forces and their need for weapons is linked to operations similar to guerilla warfare activity. However, the continuation of armed confrontation and the expansion of its reach will require the provision of increasing financial capacities whose modality is unclear.

The Deterioration of Syria's Economic Conditions

In an interview with The Guardian (29 September 2011), a Damascus hotel chain manager revealed that last February his hotels were almost fully booked for several months in advance but all of the reservations were cancelled due to the eruption of the popular uprising.

Furthermore, he believes that the Syrian tourism sector that generates about eight billion dollars a year has been paralyzed entirely. Even Syrians abroad, with the exception of a small minority, no longer desire to spend their annual vacations in their motherland.

Still, the tourism sector is only one indication of Syrian economic decline six months into the popular uprising. Last August, the governor of the Central Bank of Syria (who Washington recently refused to issue a visa he required to attend World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings) stated that the bank has spent nearly two billion dollars (from the national monetary serve's balance of no more than 16 billion dollars) so far to protect the value of the Syrian lira. However, it is apparent that the Central Bank's efforts are not adequate to maintain the situation of the lira, whose exchange rate is 73 to a euro in the private sector of currency although the official rate is no more than 66 to a euro.

The movement of the dollar may halt completely in the country and abroad as a sign of substantial regression of commercial exchange, both in importation and exportation. The Ministry of Economy and Trade banned the importation of cars and other luxury goods in attempt to stop the exhaustion of foreign currency in the national monetary reserves, but soon stopped the ban in fear of the inflationary impact of immense Western sanctions. The problem lies in the fact that this kind of economic deterioration stops the activity of thousands of businessmen that still support the regime. Opposition activists and observers within the country maintain that work in major Syrian ports has reached its lowest; and although the government continues to pay its employees regularly, it has recently imposed additional taxes on them in order to sustain its budget.

It appears that the greater burden on government imports comes from the harsh economic and financial sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union. One of the more prominent sanctions is that of the importation of Syrian crude oil, effective as of mid-October. Syria is known to produce around 400,000 barrels of oil daily and exports 150,000. This is a small number considering the size of the global oil market which will not be affected significantly by the sanction. It will, however, have an impact on Syria as it generates six billion dollars annually. Syrian officials claim that there are other markets to export oil to but this does not seem to be valid as Syria produces heavy-grade oil for which there are only a few refineries located in a number of European countries.

It is too early to say that the Syrian economy is on the verge of collapse or that the state's capabilities have been completely depleted but its size is relatively small and is only a little bit over 100 billion.

Although premature reports indicate that Iran is willing to grant the regime aid or loans worth several billion dollars, there is no evidence substantiating such claims. Regardless, even if Iran intends to provide such support, Iranian assistance will certainly remain limited and insufficient to tackle the Syrian regime's burdens. In any case, Syria is a state with a population of 24 million, not a political organization.

Announcing the Formation of an Expanded National Council

The third development in the Syrian political scene pertains to the announcement in Istanbul (2 October 2011) of the formation of the expanded Syrian National Council to incorporate the larger sector of the opposition which includes: the administrative board of the council that worked for two months to reach this great achievement, the Damascus Declaration, the Muslim Brotherhood, the two major coordination groupings, several Kurdish forces, and prominent Syrian liberal opposition figures such as Burhan Ghalioun. The council will take in around 230 members, 29 of which will be forming the general secretariat representing all of the blocs and orientations that joined, and seven establishing the governing body, sharing the council's presidency for a limited period of time.

The declaration statement was written with radical yet responsible language and demanded major and comprehensive changes in the ruling regime, affirming Syria's independence and the rejection of foreign military intervention. It, however, simultaneously affirmed the international community's responsibility to maintain the lives of Syrians who are in danger of being killed, detained and tortured by the regime's military and security forces.

Hours after announcing the birth of the council (whose governing bodies are still deficient), protests in favor of it erupted all over Syria and lasted for two consecutive days and during the Friday protests, the slogan "The national council represents me" was raised. Thus, the Syrian people have resolved the controversy regarding the revolution's representation and the unification of opposition forces. Greetings were delivered to the council from the official spokesmen of the American and French governments. It is believed that Western countries, in addition to Turkey and a number of Arab countries, will establish communication, work and consultation relations with the council in the upcoming weeks.

There is no doubt that the formation of the national council signifies the success of opposition forces - with all of its different ethnic, intellectual and sectarian backgrounds - and local popular movement groups in overcoming a great obstacle that raised many questions concerning whether the Syrian revolution will be able to present itself to the world under a political heading with convincing representation, as the lack of a representative body was a significant source of relief for the regime and those linked to it.

As a result of this development, the regime should now be as concerned as it was for failing to suppress and contain the expanding popular movement.

Indications and Conclusions

It was clear from the very beginning that Syria would be one of the most difficult episodes of what is known as the Arab spring and the Arab peoples' attempt to bring about transformative historical change in their political lives. By the end of August, the balance of power appeared to lean towards popular movement. However, an unprecedented suppression campaign in subsequent weeks in the backdrop of Arab and international silence and negligence restored conditions by midsummer; a popular movement incapable of overthrowing the ruling regime, and a regime unable to

eradicate or contain the popular movement. What led to this regressive situation is the expansion of the gap between the people and the regime and the birth of a state of despair among popular forces at a time in which the number of victims exceeded 3,000 slain and 100 detained.

This is the context that pushes the Syrian revolution toward a military approach, denoting the abandonment of the absolutely peaceful nature of the revolution and the use of arms for self-defense. The more significant and prominent manifestation of this orientation is the organization of dissident officers and soldiers - whose numbers increase rapidly - as a fighting force.

In addition, it is not easy to predict the extent this development will reach in the events of the Syrian revolution or the Free Syrian Army's ability to resist. However, if the compass of the phenomenon expands, it will contribute not only to the collapse of the regime and the repressive institutions it relies on but also to the exacerbation of the sectarian issue as it is certain that so far all of the dissident officers and soldiers are Sunni Muslims.

In response to the rise of the bloody suppression campaign that the regime vows, that has succeeded so far in preventing the protests from including hundreds of thousands, as was the case in Hama midsummer, and preventing the revolution's current from reaching downtown Damascus and downtown Aleppo, the regime's economic and political losses are severe. Estimates suggest that the Syrian economy is on the verge of retracting this year by at least 2%. The state's financial revenues will be subject to strong blows due to the decline of tourism, decreasing rates of production and exportation and sanctions on Syrian oil as well as Syrian companies and institutions owned by regime affiliates.

Politically, opposition forces and the popular movement succeeded in establishing a unified national council which will contribute to the increased isolation of the regime. Even if the joint Russian-Chinese veto against the draft resolution presented to the United Nations Security Council against the Syrian regime's policies implies that the international position is no longer unable to provide tangible aid to the Syrian people, this should not be a source of relief for the regime in Damascus. This veto is merely a reaffirmation that there is division among major powers regarding the Syrian issue, not that the international community is in favor of the regime. What should now be observed is the willingness of the Arab countries to interact with the Syrian National Council.