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ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Position Paper

The Syrian Regime Faces the Scrutiny of Arab Monitors



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Shortly after the arrival of the first delegation of Arab monitors in Damascus, two explosions occurred targeting "sub-security", killing forty four people and injuring 160 according to official data. Immediately afterwards, Syrian officials announced that al-Qaeda is responsible for the explosions. The next day, however, it was announced on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood website that the Brotherhood is responsible before it was discovered that the website was actually a scam that the son of the director of the Office of the Grand Mufti was behind.

These occurrences cast dense shadows of suspicion about the probable actor. The Syrian National Council and most Syrian activists accused the regime of being responsible for the explosions, hypothesizing that it aimed to disturb the delegation of monitors and portray itself as a victim of terrorist operations.

The Regime Monitors the Monitors

Undoubtedly, the regime is concerned about the work of the monitors, which was illustrated by the fact that it only consented to their advent to avoid internalization. Also, it appears that the regime has developed a multidimensional to hinder or affect their work in a manner that suits it. It is possible that one of the pillars of this strategy is the agreement on enabling a Sudanese general suspected of being involved in the lethal Darfur events and known for his intimate relations with al-Assad's regime to head the delegation of monitors.

It is not clear whether the Syrian regime has anything to do with the small number of monitors (the numbers conflict – 60 or 75 – but are always under 100) seeing as that the monitors arrived five days late.

Among the elements of this strategy is that the monitors are always accompanied by Syrian security, which is why the residents of Baba Amr in Homs refused to receive a number of monitors on Thursday, 29th December 2011.

Furthermore, Syrian authorities provide the monitors with transportation and thus can deter their movement whenever they see it fit to do so. The chairman of the Syrian National Council, Burhan Ghalioun, announced that he contacted the monitors in a hotel in Homs on Wednesday, 28th December 2011, to urge them to head towards Baba Amr; they responded that they requested transportation to there but the authorities ignored their request.

Accordingly, the protocol of the monitors' mission requires that they visit prisons, detention camps and hospitals in coordination with Syrian authorities which may have them visit alleged prisoners who are actually security officials or loyalists. Syrian television channels broadcasted scenes of monitors visiting casualties in government hospitals while unknown individuals strongly insist that they were targeted by "terrorists".

However, the opposition maintains that prisoners were moved to military barracks near Homs and Aleppo constituting "critical military sites" that even protocol prohibits the monitors from visiting. It also maintains that some revolution detainees may have been moved to unknown locations in Ar-Raqqa Governorate as well according to circulated information.

In addition, it has been confirmed that the regime endeavored to change the names of a number of neighbourhoods and towns near Hama, Deir ez-Zor and even Damascus to keep monitors away from revolution hotspots or areas it prefers to keep monitors away from in order to continue its suppression.

These various tactics fall into the context of a general strategy that aims to encircle any potential negative effects the monitors may have on the regime but without appearing as a direct hindrance to their work.

The basis of this strategy is the separation of the political content of the Arab initiative and the work of the Arab League monitors as the initiative required that the killing stop, that the army withdraw from the cities, and that detainees be released as well as the start of internal political dialogue. None of this was carried out and it is uncertain whether the regime did in fact release a number of detainees whose releases were announced (755 detainees were named in the most recent announcement on 28th December 2011), bearing in mind that these numbers comprise only a small percentage of the total number of revolution detainees which the opposition estimates to be around 15,000. Furthermore, some recognised names from among the revolution detainees that have yet to be released including Najati Tayara, Shadi Abu Fakher, Amer Matar, Reem Al Ghazzi, and others.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem had announced that the regime consented to the protocol arranged for the work of Arab League monitors, separating it from the Arab initiative although the protocol is only meant to be its procedural countenance. Perhaps the abovementioned tactics of manipulation are a matter of detail of which al-Muallem himself mentioned that monitors must learn to swim in the midst.

Monitors Protect Protestors

Despite all of this, observing the remaining days of the monitors' work is not adequate to assess their mission although the opposition is inclined to have low expectations of the delegation's endeavour. In fact, what lowers the ceiling of expectations is not only the regime's tactics or reduction of the Arab initiative to its procedural dimension; rather, it is a more important structural determinant symbolized by the monitors' representation of the Arab regime. This regime does not possess adequate independence and legitimacy for the scrutiny of a member in it that resembles it. Manifestations of hesitance that characterized the team of monitors like the mission's delay for several days, the team's small size (below 100) eleven days into the mission, and poor preparations all resemble the Arab regime's decline and the stagnation of its determination. Above all, the level of the monitors' qualification for the task assigned to it, the level of the monitors' engagement with the governments of their respective countries, and the potential influence of this engagement on their mission in Syria remain vague.

The low expectations were reflected in the positions of Syrian protestors as expressed by the signs raised in protests. However, the negative public opinion intertwined with the hope that the monitors' endeavour will have an outcome or that Syrians will be given the chance to be heard by someone in the world. After ten months of isolation and abuse by the regime, their enthusiasm in Harasta (near Damascus) led them to carry on their shoulders one of the Arab monitors who may have listened to them or showed them some sympathy.

Despite all the rationales for doubt, popular protests in which monitors were present were noticeably safer; and thanks to the monitors, protestors in Deir Baalba (in Homs) were not exposed to any attacks Thursday evening, 29th December 2011, nor were those in al-Khalidiya (also in Homs) and Douma on Friday, 30th December 2011. That Friday proved to be a new momentum in demonstrating in terms of the number of protestors or the vastness of demonstration areas. Some monitors estimate that there were 100,000 protestors in Douma that Friday, on which a team of monitors headed towards Damascus's neighbouring city.

Syrian authorities see the connection between the presence of monitors and the increase of protests and protestors and may prevent or delay the arrival of more monitors to obstruct their movement or as the spokesman for the Syrian Foreign Ministry, Jihad al-Maqdisi, stated, Syrian authorities do not guarantee the safety of the monitors in "outlawed" hotspots.

There is no guarantee that the Syrian authorities will not attack the monitors as it delays the performance of their mission while giving the regime's narrative some sort of credibility. This is not unlikely and is in fact increasingly probable if the regime sees that the monitors' mission, with all of its maneuvers, is relative protection for the protests enabling the peaceful popular revolution to retake the lead.

If the regime does come to this outcome, the remaining days may witness the monitors' delegation of developments toward the restriction of their mission by deterring the arrival of more monitors and attempting to influence the content of their reports, although protocol provides that Syrian authorities are to see but not modify the reports before they are sent.

On the other hand, there is another factor that supports the monitors in their mission, namely international reactions and the Arab league itself, which focus on the objectivity of the monitors and their right to acquire conveniences that guarantee the performance of their work, all of which reinforce their position in the confrontation of Syrian authorities. If matters go in this direction, the regime will most likely become firm in its interaction with them and may even refuse to renew their mission after the specified duration of one month for the first mission ends; and thus, a new phase starts in which the regime seeks to save time and the Arab League seeks to internationalise pressure on it.