Opinion Piece

Restoration of Writ in Aleppo - How Far is Peace for Syria?

by Hamza Iftikhar Research Associate, MUSLIM Institute

After weeks of deadly battles between the opposition groups and the pro-government forces, the Syrian army took control over all of Aleppo as the last group of evacuees left eastern Aleppo on Thursday. Sadly though, this does not mean that the Syrian conflict is nearing to an end. The reality couldn't be far from it. Nor will this 'victory' bring back the scores of innocent civilians killed or take away the suffering of those who have endured unimaginable hardships over the past six years in the form starvation, bombings and lack of medical attention. Not to mention the tens of millions who had to leave their homes in order to save their

lives and those who are living in besieged areas. Just two days ago, around 35,000 more people had to leave their homes in order to evacuate to safety while about 70,000 have fled on foot to government-controlled areas since mid-November. In the last month alone, around 460 civilians have been killed in Aleppo, whereas the United Nations Human Rights Office said that it had reliable evidence that up to 82 civilians were shot on the spot by pro-government forces. We have reached such a depressing stage in the Syrian conflict that even shocking reports like these are not "unexpected" anymore. It is as if the world has given up on Syria, or better put, given up on humanity.

According to an estimate by the UN special envoy for Syria Mr Staffan de Mistura, 400,000 people have been killed in Syria ever since the conflict began in 2011. This then begs the question: how many more need to die before there's a clear "winner" in Syria? How many more need to die before we as humans feel the responsibility to do something? In response to the world's outrage regarding the siege of eastern Aleppo, the UN Security Council passed a resolution allowing 20 observers to monitor the evacuations. Now that the people have finally evacuated the city after long and torturous weeks in sub-zero temperatures, does that mean the job is done? Following the developments in Syria for the past almost six years, it wouldn't be wrong to predict that the conflict can potentially follow to the Idlib province, east of Aleppo, where large number of civilians have evacuated to. According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Idlib already hosts about 230,000 displaced people in almost 250 camps. Thus, the necessity to find a solution to the crisis is now required more than ever.

There are many actors involved in the Syrian conflict, both domestic and international, non-state and state ones. When we look at the appalling and dreadful facts on the ground in Syria, it's easy to play the blame game and point fingers at one or the other. We all have access to news and media covering this ferocious war, so instead of quoting here the exact figures and statistics regarding which group has killed more civilians, the point is that all have – and this is not acceptable. Blaming one group or the other for acting more 'unjustly' is not going to bring back all the 400,000, may be even more, dead. It is not going to bring back the millions of displaced people to their homes safely. It is not going to lessen the suffering for the innocent civilians on the ground that have to live every day like it might be the last one. Whether it be the pro-Assad forces including the Syrian army and pro-government militias, supported by Iran and Russia, or the opposition forces including the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat Fatah Al Sham or other rebel groups backed by the United States, Turkey and the Arab Gulf States, everyone is to be blamed and they all are paying a price one way or the other. Hence, there are no "winners" in this conflict. We need to understand this and make our peace with it if we are to find a solution that will end the continued and prolonged bloodshed in Syria.

Although he may have won the battle for Aleppo and gained momentum in the war, but Bashar Al Assad is still far from controlling the majority of Syria. He still needs to deal with the opposition groups in the North East, South East, Kurdish YPG in the North, and last but not the least, the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The stagnant economy, ruined infrastructure and aggravated sectarian divisions in Syria mean that even if he 'wins' the official war, Assad will have a long way to go before peace can prevail. While Russia certainly had an impact on the Syrian conflict, it did so with consequences. Apart from the huge cost of this venture and Russian fatalities in Syria, the attack on the Russian Metrojet Flight 9268 last year in October and the recent killing of Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrei Karlov in Istanbul are some of the heavy prices that Moscow had to pay due to its involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Similarly, the United States, Turkey and the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, all have had to endure massive financial costs and most importantly had to pay the price in the form of heinous terrorist attacks on their soil as a result of their involvement in the Syrian conflict. But instead of working out a whole balance sheet in order to determine which group has lost more lives, it is suffice to say that both sides have suffered. Suffering that could have been avoided. More notably, the conflict between the two sides has ruined the country itself, exacerbated the existing regional turmoil, displaced millions of people and killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians who didn't even chose to be in this inferno.

The blame for this prolonged conflict that continues to get worse day by day therefore rests on everyone involved. The international community in the form of international and regional organizations such as the UN, the Arab League or Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have all failed to work out a solution to a conflict that started off as just anti-government protests. Not just in Syria, but it has also failed to attend to the dire situation in Iraq, Libya as well as Yemen. Living in the 21st century with the presence of these remarkable institutions, it is inconceivable that we still are not able to stop the blood being spilled over and over again.

The situation in Syria, as well as in Iraq, Libya and Yemen, highlights the severe leadership crisis and strong divisions amongst Muslim countries themselves. All Muslim actors, regardless of their ideologies and interests, need to remind themselves of their Islamic roots when making decisions that could have repercussions far beyond their own borders. This is not something new or anything that has never been witnessed in history, it's essentially cost/benefit analysis. Sadly in this case, when talking about the cost we ought to reduce the value of human life, even if it may be in hundreds of thousands. Helping those in need

is one of the core principles of Islam, yet there's barely any support and refuge given to those in need in Syria by those who are in the surrounding area. If Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and even Europe is able to accommodate the refugees and provide them with basic food and shelter, then why can't the rest of us?

Even if geographical complications do not allow some countries to host refugees, the least they can do is to help end the bloodshed through diplomacy and mediation via the institutions that were formed for this exact purpose. The situation that enfolded in Aleppo was not something new or out of the blue. It was the continuity of endless turmoil in the Arab World. The regional actors need to realise how detrimental can the spill-over effect be of these conflicts for the whole Muslim world and its unity, at least whatever's left of it. There's a great danger of intensification of prevalent polarization along sectarian lines due to conflicting interests in the Syrian situation, as well as other regional conflicts. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that the key players in the region work out a solution in Syria through dialogue with Syrians and other actors via institutions like the UN, Arab League and the OIC in order to stop the bloodshed immediately, attend to the safety and well-being of those displaced, and form a consensus amongst the opposing parties so peace can prosper in the short and long term. Similar approach needs to be adopted when dealing with other crisis such as those in Iraq, Libya and Yemen. It is about time that humanity should be given priority over economic, geopolitical and ideological interests. For if we ourselves are going to turn against each other and ignore the cries of those in need, then how can we expect the rest of the world to act any different?