



An Opinion Piece on

Syria's Turn

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The drums of war have been beating, the trumpets have been blaring with their volume increasing each passing day. The war machine has gained momentum and the chessboard is inching towards the final moves. Syria, a country bleeding for more than a year, now waits with abated breath for the final blows.



The US has been raising hue and cry of human rights abuse by the Assad regime, over the alleged chemical weapon attack at Aleppo where 1400 civilians are said to have lost their lives , trying to peddle support for a hands-off 'limited' missile strike about which, during an interview, Senator John Macaine stated that the US is not going to war like they did in Afghanistan and Iraq, on the contrary, their strikes are aimed to 'down grade' Assad's army by limiting them in their capabilities to strike the 'Free Syrian Army', chemically or otherwise. The strike is to be time bound and is to have no American boots on the Syrian soil.



The US President has been garnering support for this strike from its usual allies, and was a salient topic during the G20 summit held last week. He persuaded 10 other G-20 nations to join the US in signing a statement calling for a strong international response, although it fell short of supporting military strikes, underscoring the deep disagreements that dominated the summit. Not only that, US has also been experiencing a lack of support on its own shores with many members of Congress remaining deeply skeptical about the President's proposal to carry out missile strikes in Syria.

Only Turkey, Canada, Saudi Arabia and France joined the US push for intervention, while, the UK Prime Minister's position was not supported by his citizens. Moreover, it is an open secret that Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been financing and arming Syrian Rebels since 2011, and recently media has reported their purported offer to the US to completely fund the strike on Syria, if it was to take place.



The community of political analysts firmly believes that the animosity felt towards Syria by Saudi Arabia has Iran at the core, to be even more specific, the Shia Sunni sectarian divide. It has become evident that the Middle East region is becoming a hostage to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both the power players have been using every trick in the book to gain regional hegemony, and, sadly, due to this animosity, the Arab countries are playing, either intentionally or blinded by their sectarian leanings or their lust for power, right into the agenda of Zionist forces who are bent upon destroying or destabilizing the Middle Eastern Muslim countries to



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pave way for a greater Israel.

Russia, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa and Italy were among the major world economies clearly opposed to military intervention. Russia has been at the forefront in denying the American war beast of the sadistic pleasure of more Muslim blood, with China



not far behind. These two countries have vetoed military strikes in the UN Security Council. On the case of the alleged chemical attack at Aleppo, Russian President stated that he believes the alleged chemical weapons attack was nothing more than *"a provocation on behalf of the armed*

insurgents in hope of the help from the outside, from the countries which supported them from day one". Indonesia has been calling on the international community to refrain from extrajudicial justice on Syria, and to wait until UN investigators publish the results of their work.

As a primary backer of the Syrian government, Iran has argued vehemently against US airstrikes, warned that sectarian "fire" will spread, and that jihadi rebels may have been behind the Aug. 21 chemical weapons attack that US officials say killed more than 1,400 people in a Damascus suburb.

Syria has been under the state of emergency since 1963 until April 2011, i.e. from the time the Military Committee of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, commonly known as the "Ba'ath party" successfully seized power after a coup d'etat, also known as the 8th March Revolution in 1963, to the Arab Spring uprising (2011). In 1970, Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, seized power after rising through the ranks of the Syrian armed forces, during which time he established a network of loyal Alawites by installing them on key posts. In fact, the military, ruling elite, and ruthless secret police are so intertwined that it is now impossible to separate the Assad government from the security establishment. The government and its loyal forces have been able to deter all but the most resolute and fearless oppositional activists. In this respect, the situation in Syria is to a certain degree comparable to Saddam Hussein's strong Sunni minority rule in Iraq."



Till this day Syria has been a Multi-party state without free elections. The state of emergency gave security forces sweeping powers. And critics write that these sweeping powers have given rise to a long history of arbitrary arrest, unfair trials and prolonged detention of suspects; where the secret police routinely torture, imprison, and kill political opponents, and those who speak out against the government. Thousands of political prisoners remain in detention, with many belonging to the banned Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party. Since June 2000, more than 700 long-term political prisoners have been freed by President al-Asad, though an estimated 4,000 are reportedly still imprisoned. Information regarding those detained in relation to political or security-related charges is not divulged by the authorities. The government has

not acknowledged responsibility for around 17,000 Lebanese citizens and Palestinians who "disappeared" in Lebanon in the 1980s and early 1990s and are thought to be imprisoned in Syria. In 2009, hundreds of people were arrested and imprisoned for political reasons. Military Police were reported to have killed at least 17 detainees. Freedom of expression, association, and assembly are strictly controlled. Women and ethnic minorities face discrimination and corruption is rampant. According to Human Rights Watch, President Assad's government (2000 – present), failed to improve Syria's human rights record in the first 10 years of his rule, and Syria's human rights situation remained among the worst in the world. According to Amnesty International, the government may be guilty of crimes against humanity based on "witness accounts of deaths in custody, torture and arbitrary detention". Since 2006 it expanded the use of travel bans against dissidents.



On the international front, Assad government has been under intense international scrutiny for possession of chemical weapons, for its anti-US role in Iraq, for supporting Palestinian militant groups and their alleged involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005, not to mention its close ties with Iran.

Since 1979, the alliance between Syria and Iran has had significant impact in both shaping Middle East politics and thwarting the regional ambitions of the United States, Israel and Iraq (during Saddam Hussain's rule). The two regimes share common traits. They are both authoritarian and defiantly independent, even at a political or economic cost. Iran is predominantly Shiite. Although Syria is predominantly Sunni Muslim, its ruling family is Alawite, a Shiite sect. At the same time, they are odd political bedfellows. Syria's Baa'thist ideology is strictly secular and socialist. Iran's ideology is rigidly religious and, in principle, opposed to atheist communism and its offshoots. Yet their common strategic goals have held the alliance together for three decades, despite repeated attempts to render them apart.

The Iran-Syria alliance grew out of common cause, need and common enemies. Since Iran's 1979 revolution, the two regional powerhouses have pooled political leverage and military resources to enhance their position, built a network of surrogate militias and frustrate the plans of opponents. Together the regimes stood a better chance at survival, without having to accommodate either domestic or foreign demands for change, than they would without each other. Together they also stand a better chance of achieving their long-term goals. Syria wants to regain the strategic Golan Heights, lost to Israel in the 1967 War, and keep its veto power over Lebanese politics. Iran wants to be the preeminent regional player in the Persian Gulf and ensure its allies rule in Iraq. Both also want to protect Arab interests (in the case of Damascus) and Shiite interests (in the case of Iran) throughout the region.



Together they ensured Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which bordered both countries, would not

become the predominant regional power. Syria was a conduit for arms shipments to Iran during the Iran-Iraq conflict. This was particularly important after Iran's relations with Moscow deteriorated in 1982 and Washington orchestrated a widespread arms embargo in 1983. Iran responded by developing its own arms industry in the 1980s. Then during 1990s, Iran took the lead role in joint efforts with Syria to develop ballistic missile capabilities. Iran now exports arms to Syria and helps finance Syrian arms purchases from Russia, Belarus, North Korea and elsewhere. Together they forced U.S. peacekeepers out of Lebanon in 1984, and thwarted Israel's effort to bring Lebanon into its orbit during an 18-year occupation that finally ended in Israel's unilateral withdrawal in 2000. The odd bedfellows together sired or supported Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and an array of radical Palestinian groups.



Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, would like to see a pro-Saudi regime in Damascus, in order to promote its role in the region. A crucial aim is to counter the inexorable loss of Iraq and Lebanon, where Iranian influence has grown; most recently, with the Saudi protégé in Beirut, Saad Hariri, losing the premiership. In addition to losing its client leaders in both Tunisia and Egypt, the Saudis have also lost out to Qatar in reconciling Palestinian factions. Consequently, Saudi interest in Syria represents nothing less than drawing a line in the sand against its declining regional influence. Therefore, from Saudi regime's perspective, only getting rid of Bashar al-Assad can erode Iranian influence both in the Arab Mediterranean region and in the Gulf itself. Saudi Arabia's enthusiastic support for the year-old Syrian uprising contrasts starkly with its condemnation of those in Tunisia and Egypt, its tepid support for revolution in Libya, and its counter-revolutionary role in Bahrain and Yemen is evidence enough for critics to believe that Saudi Arabia is playing on the US tune.

The exposed WikiLeaks documents portrayed a terrified Saudi regime, haunted by the crippling fear from the Ayatollahs, and in particular, their nuclear program. This fear is, of course, common to all the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC], led by Saudi-Arabia. According to unverified reports, this fear has led the Saudis to support, behind closed doors, the possibility of Israeli/and or American military strike against Iran. It is not something that the Saudis will say in public, nor will they admit any connection between the Iran issue and the fate of the Assad regime.



Due to this hostility between the two elephants, Syrian refugees see no end to their exile. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres said the number of Syria refugees had already topped two million. "There are no words to express this tragedy," Guterres told reporters in Geneva, adding that the exodus showed no sign of abating and risked destabilizing the region. In addition to refugees who have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran

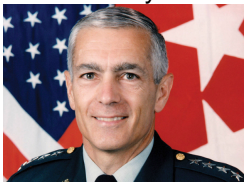
and Egypt, the fighting has also displaced more than six million people, over one quarter of Syria's population of 22 million.

Meanwhile, Israel possesses between 200 and 300 nuclear warheads with missiles capable of delivering them throughout the region and far beyond. Furthermore, it will not sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty or allow international inspections of its nuclear facilities. Iran has long since agreed with Saudi Arabia and declared the entire ME should be nuclear weapons free. This is also in accordance with the Pentagon which has declared that the best way to deal with the issue is to have Israel get rid of its nuclear weapons. Of course, Israel has refused to cooperate because it wants to remain the invincible bully of the ME and hence, able to maintain its belligerent, illegal and brutal occupations of Palestinian and other Arab lands and continue stealing their water resources and building illegal Zionist Jew settlement/colonies.



Like pawns of a chessboard, the US and Israel have been strategically taking out strong men/regimes in the middle east, all Muslim countries, replacing them by unstable, weak and vulnerable leaderships. Leadership of the Middle East must realize that this fire that rages in the region shall leave no country out, be it the Gulf countries or Iran, sooner or later, this fire shall be at their doorsteps. Now is the time to take concrete steps to work towards a united front for the Muslim Ummah, and work towards a society envisioned by Islam. Vested interests so far have only led to divisions and subsequently the downfall of the Muslim nation.

Even though Syria has accepted the Russian proposal to hand over its chemical weapons to avert the threat of US military strikes over Damascus, setting off a flurry of diplomatic activity as world leaders scrambled to respond to the gesture. The GCC is stating that handing over of weapons would not stop the bloodshed in Syria, while Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel stated “While everyone was hopeful the move could be “a real solution to the crisis, the threat of



“credible, real” US military action had to remain on the table”. It would be interesting to mention a statement extracted from an interview in 2007 of General (Retd) Wesley Clark, a 4 star US Army General, who also served as the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO during the 1999 War on Yugoslavia, “This is a memo (a memo that was received from the office of US Secretary of Defense) that describes how we’re going to take out seven countries in five years, starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and, finishing off, Iran.”

It is vital for the survival that all Muslim Nations utilize the platforms available such as the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Conference with a constructive, positive and, most importantly, an effective approach. Vested interests need to be put aside to address imminent threats being faced by the Muslim Ummah as a whole. The Muslim Ummah and its current leadership must realize that we are facing a very powerful and united enemy, and if we don't measure up to the challenge and opportunity to stand united and tall, and continue on this path

of division and further division, we shall be taken out one by one.



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