

Syria's War is Not Over

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Brief Analysis

Conversations on the future of Syria have increasingly shifted to reconstruction and ‘the day after,’ with international calls for an end to the Syrian regime, significantly weakened as a result of years of war and suffering. During an October 2 seminar on conflict mediation in Sweden, UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura described his mission there as a doctor ‘struggling to reduce the pain’ and unable to provide any treatment. Yet the new, apparently accepted situation that allows for the continuation of pre-2011 political regime with the toxic addition of Russia and Iran is hardly a recipe for effective reconstruction of Syria. If the United Nations has given up hope for a political solution and any serious efforts to implement one, this means that we—the Syrian people, Western influence, and international law—have lost.

I spent decades opposing the Syrian regime, having been detained in its prisons for approximately ten years, and as a participant in many of the Syrian opposition movements from 1976 to 2014, when I resigned from the SNC and Coalition opposition bodies due to corruption and encroaching relationships with foreign state actors and terrorist groups. Given this history, I have a perspective that has been increasingly excised from the international narrative but is nevertheless important for the rebuilding of Syria: my previous homeland that I have lost and still care for.

At this point, any political system is better than chaos, or rule by warlords, or of course terrorist control. But when we speak of the current Syrian regime, it cannot be recognized as a social or political system. Rather, the Syrian regime has operated as a criminal system using the tactics of organized crime rather than that of political actors. The transitional plan for a new political system and regime must be a critical and important international priority, since for a majority of Syrians it is unbelievable that after all that has happened the current regime could be rehabilitated as a standard political actor. Consequently, neither the regime nor the organized opposition—which has its own serious issues in terms of representation—can produce a solution. The Syrian people need justice from the international community, not a reinstatement of representation from the very bodies that repressed them. While this is increasingly being presented as the only option in terms of stability, the only way to ensure that another uprising does not occur is to begin with a clean slate—continuing the Syrian regime’s hold on Syria is only the next step in a cycle of uprisings, repression, and terrorism.

Indeed, while much of the recent discourse has presented the regime as an alternative to terrorism, the reality is that dictatorship and terrorism are two sides of the same coin. Both systems of control rely on cruelty to repress normal

political life. In the absence of legal parties and representation, either version of oppression can flourish, and will continue to be dictated by the strategic interests of foreign states as it is now rather than by any of the ideals that the UN asserts it upholds.

This is reflected by the historical reality that Syria is an artificial state, created by colonial and international powers in the last century. Since then, the Syrian people have had scant opportunity to develop a unifying sense of patriotism. Thus, the Syrian people need international help and efforts to create a new national contract to rebuild a real homeland. However, several local and international states do not respect human rights laws nor do they acknowledge their responsibility; they bear, in my opinion, the main responsibility for what has happened in Syria. Since their national interests are not compatible with the Syrian people's interests, at least in the short term, they support the killer of these people; the others generally choose the cheapest solution, which is the worst.

However, there are several clear and necessary components to truly rebuild Syria. The state requires a new constitution, and a legal system that can facilitate its writing—most importantly, democratic elections. In order to even think about facilitating elections, the country needs stability. The UN felt confident in shaping the structure of Syria through its resolution that granted its independence in 1947. Today, the UN must resume this role by announcing Syria as a failed state, asking Russia and Iran to respect the Geneva Conventions on the Status of War and Occupation, defining a road map for new transitional authority, using justice to exclude the current criminal leaders from both sides, and finally putting an end to the occupation of foreign militias and armies.

Without these steps, the international community's current interest in providing money to rebuild Syria will only enhance the systems of corruption, terrorism, and dictatorship that currently pervade Syria, ultimately pushing the conflict into the next decade. The Syrian regime is in clear violation of all UN's understanding of human rights and legitimate governance.

In terms of a suitable transitional political structure, it is evident that a centralized presidential political system is not suitable to the structure of the Syrian society. Syria has the best chance of maintaining democracy as a federal state based on cultural rather than geographic distinctions. Both minority and majority rights relating to the identity of the state, its capital city, the language, and outside coalitions must be respected. Moreover, the government must provide avenues for both traditional society (including national and sectarian components by quota) and civil society to help shape the government, with the former system shaping state sovereign functions including the foreign, defense, justice and economic ministries and later shaping the servicing function of the state elected by a proportional system. Under this structure, the President should assume an honorary rather than all-encompassing position.

The steps outlined above are not easy fixes, but their necessity is being masked by a sense of fatigue with the Syrian war and a misguided sense that the Syrian regime will be able to maintain stability. Rather, the continued repression of the Syrian regime, along with the cruel occupation of Russia and Iran, will only continue to foment conflict in the decades ahead. If the international community is actually interested in ending this cycle, it will be required to shape a new government in Syria, either now or when the country's situation deteriorates again in the future. ❖

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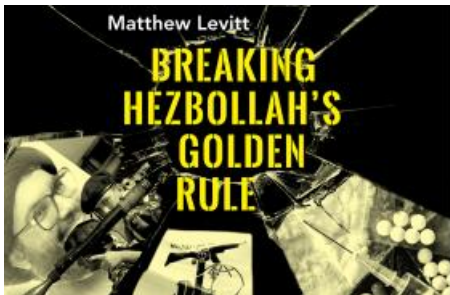
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