

The Aleppo Betrayal

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Brief Analysis

The inevitable outcome in Aleppo shows how the Syrian revolution has been betrayed first and foremost by Islamism in all its expressions, particularly international jihadism.

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The amassed forces of the Syrian regime may have a hard time overrunning the last strongholds of the Syrian rebels in Aleppo, despite substantive material support provided by Russia, Iran, and Iranian proxies. Still, the raging battle of Aleppo signals a decisive shift in the Syrian crisis: the restoration of the regime to its former might may remain elusive, but the rebels no longer have a credible path to toppling Assad. Instead, the Syrian revolution, which held the promise of overthrowing one of the most enduring and brutal dictatorships in the region, is faced with the prospect of being reduced to a rebellion striving through disruptive acts of insurgency to break out of containment and marginality. Narratives of "betrayal" compete in assigning the blame for the Aleppo tragedy, laying the groundwork for their future invocation in the next phase of a conflict that has already resulted in the loss of well over half a million lives, immeasurable suffering, and the destruction of much of the country.

The Syrian war has operated at three hierarchical levels -- local, regional, and international. The assessment of agency and responsibility has varied considerably as a function of the level considered.

In its most basic manifestation, the conflict has been between the regime and a rebellion that emerged in its midst. The rebellion has assumed many forms; its factions, whether civil or armed, have experienced a whirlwind of fission and fusion -- in structure, ideas, and even in framing the ultimate goal. Many factors were detrimental to the Syrian opposition. It was infiltrated and at times manipulated by the regime; influenced, misguided, and ill-directed by external actors; and deeply burdened by individuals and groups who managed to profit from the rebellion. But despite positive manifestations in the form of grassroots action and principled militancy, the Syrian opposition has failed to coalesce into a coherent expression of the will for a genuine political transformation.

The Syrian revolution was indeed betrayed; by petty interest and myopic vision for sure, but first and foremost by

Islamism in all of its expressions. The desire of the Syrian population to assert its dignity, freedom, and longing for political justice was hijacked by the stealth effort of local ideological Islamists, stemming from the Muslim Brothers, aiming to settle scores with the despotic regime for its repression of their movement in past decades. But, by many more orders of magnitude, the betrayal came in the form of an international jihadism claiming to come to the rescue of victimized Muslims, only to inflict upon all Syrians its own alien and brutal vision of religious regimentation and depraved punishment. Young men from Chinese Xin Jiang, Russian Dagestan, or the Parisian banlieues competing in their suicide attacks to eradicate rival radical factions on Syrian soil cannot be ignored as a primary factor in the Syrian revolution's derailing and Syrian society's suffering. Any hope of recovery for the Syrian revolution is premised on the re-Syrianization of its goals, actions, and participants. It is a hope that is still awaiting a vehicle for its expression; it is nonetheless clear, in light of the indelible history of brutalization and rampant factionalism, that there can be no lasting rehabilitation of the regime. The Syrian revolution will continue to metastasize. The direction of its transformation will be shaped by lessons learned -- or not -- from the current failures.

The regime, on the other hand, has been consistent and single-minded. Stated in a blunt and crude rhyme, and scribbled on walls across the subdued parts of the land, the regime's strategy is simple: "Al-Asad, aw nahruq al-balad," that is, "Assad, or we burn the country." In fact, the choice between the continuation of the dictatorship and the destruction of Syria has not been an either-or proposition. The regime has used all available means towards the intended end, limiting itself solely by its anticipation of the world's reaction. Having determined the absence of international will to interdict any excess, the regime has focused on managing its finite resources toward defeating its enemies. Hence, barrel bomb attacks on hospitals, schools, and markets are deemed to be cost-efficient measures that deny the opposition any sustainable normalcy, and to communicate a message of wrath through the infliction of collective punishment on opposition-compliant communities. So far, legal implications of these actions have been insignificant, while the human cost can be justified on the basis that the net toll of victims would be lower the sooner the rebels are crushed.

While led by the current president's father, the regime engaged in massive repression against the city of Hama in 1982, destroying large parts of the city and killing tens of thousands. A narrative line in pro-regime circles today laments the lack of an equally forceful approach against the current rebellion. Some of its supporters even blame the regime for tactics that are "too humane." However, in reality, the punitive power of the regime has been depleted. It may be capable of surviving as the primary authority in parts of Syria, but only as a precarious government ruling over a devastated landscape. Basking in an overstated victory in Aleppo, the regime may be contemplating a full recovery of its rule over Syria. The potential of transforming this false conviction into more repression is inherent to the nature of the regime. The net outcome may be further radicalization in anticipation of the inevitable outburst to come.

At the regional level, Iran has achieved meaningful tactical advances against the disparate and at times conflicting group of its rivals -- Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. With an explicit interest in the survival of the Syrian regime, Iran has proven its adherence to a consistent approach, allocating a wide range of resources for the Aleppo battle. Its rivals' commitments to supporting the rebel factions in Aleppo were, on the other hand, uneven. A disagreement on fundamental concerns, such as the reliance even via proxy on radical Islamist groups, may be behind the failure of a straight tactical approach to prevent the fall of Aleppo. The Syrian armed opposition is damaged, rather than strengthened, by the multiple directions sought by its backers. Aleppo is the price of a lack of coordination and a conflicted vision. Iran, however, cannot claim a clean victory. In addition to acquiescing to second status in Syria, replaced by Russia's increased influence, Tehran had to use and deplete regional assets -- such as Lebanese Hezbollah, the crown jewel of its satellite agents -- exposing it as a sectarian formation, and losing its soft capital in much of the region. Thus for Iran, tactical gains may also correspond to strategic losses.

At the international level, Russia has proven its paramountcy in handling the Syrian dossier, largely through the successive retreats of the Obama administration, both from principled stands it purported to take and from possible confrontations with the more aggressive Kremlin. Russia can also be cautiously optimistic on reaching an understanding with the incoming Trump administration to confirm its gains, by having its interests in Syria, as well as its leading role in fighting terrorism, recognized as primary. Russia is indeed in a privileged position to maneuver the tensions between other regional and international stakeholders in Syria. If it succeeds in crafting a viable arrangement that frames the Iranian role in Syria and Lebanon, it can secure the confidence of Israel in having its security and qualitative edge safeguarded.

However, these Russian hopes are based on the assumption that the Syrian revolution was artificially induced and can be fundamentally contained then eradicated, and that the outburst of jihadism in Syria was an artifact of manipulation -- be it by external enemies of the regime arming factions against it, or by the regime itself in seeking to derail and discredit the revolution. Certainly, many actors, local and regional, sought to manipulate radical militancy to their advantage. Yet the assessment of the Syrian revolution as the product of machination is highly reductionist. And even if it were to be accepted, the recent experience of death and destruction inflicted upon Syrian society, with explicit factional tones, precludes the possibility of returning to the status quo ante. Russia too, it seems, has mistaken tactical gains for strategic transformation. The resulting complacency does not bode well for the future of Syria and the region. ❖

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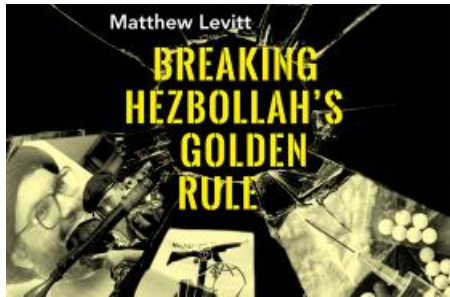
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