

Why Delayed Intervention in Syria Could Cause Radicalization

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The sooner the international community helps end the killing in Syria, the more likely it will be able to prevent radicalization of the country's population along sectarian lines.

A new argument against intervention in Syria is that since the opposition consists of radical Islamist elements, the United States and other countries should shy away from supporting the rebellion against the Bashar al-Assad regime for fear that they might empower Islamists.

I recently visited Turkey, stopping in cities near the Syrian border such as Antakya and Gaziantep. During this trip, I talked to people who are in daily contact with Syrians, including professors at Zirve University in Gaziantep, an international school that has Syrian students, and American journalists who had just returned from Syria. I did not find any evidence that Islamists run the uprising, yet I left Turkey thinking that delayed intervention against the al-Assad regime could surely lead to building Islamist resentment towards al-Assad to the point of empowering radicals in Syria.

In this regard, there is a lesson to be learned from the war in Bosnia in the 1990s. When the Yugoslav Army started its attack on Bosnia in 1992, Bosnian Muslims (also known as Bosniacs) held the distinction of being the world's "most secular Muslims." The Bosniacs' embrace of Islam was non-political, and one's level of religiosity was a personal matter. The Bosniacs even ate pork liberally, a violation of orthodox Islam that shocked even their fellow liberal Muslims in Turkey.

Only a couple of years after the onslaught against the Bosniacs began, though, Bosnia's "pork-eating" Muslims were flirting with radical Islamists, including Iranian agents and jihadists. As the outside world watched Serbian forces slaughter Bosniacs, these people increasingly came to view their persecution through a religious lens. They started to believe that (Christian) Serbs were targeting them because of their (Muslim) faith and that the outside world

turned a blind eye to their persecution because of their Islamic religion. This process led to a rapid politicization of the Bosniacs' Muslim identity. Previously secular and even irreligious Bosniacs started to view the world through a religiously-guided Manichean perspective.

This persecution-driven metamorphosis -- a historical phenomenon not uncommon among Muslim communities -- transformed the Bosnian political landscape quickly and radically. Jihadists, previously considered alien and shunned by Bosniacs, could now find refuge in Bosnia. In fact, when the outside world, led by the United States, decided to intervene in Bosnia in 1995, it was justified by the fear of speedy Bosniac radicalization.

Even though the conflict in Syria lacks an inter-religious dimension, it has a sectarian overtone that could lead to Islamic politicization in Syria akin to that in Bosnia.

The al-Assad regime's inner circle is composed of Alawites, an offshoot of Islam, while the opposition is mostly made up of Sunni Muslims. Even if the protestors' demand for democracy is non-religious, the fact that the al-Assad regime and its (Alawite) supporters are brutally killing (Sunni) demonstrators is already giving the conflict in Syria a sectarian hue. Persecution-driven metamorphosis of Islamic identity can reshape the conflict as a religious one -- one pitting Alawites against Sunnis, and Sunnis against Alawites.

As anecdotal evidence suggests, some protestors already view their persecution through a religious lens, believing that the regime is targeting them not because they demand democracy, but because it is an Alawite machine trying to massacre the Sunnis. And the more the outside world sits idly by as Syrians are slaughtered, the more the Sunnis in Syria will believe that the world turns a blind eye to such horrors because of their religion.

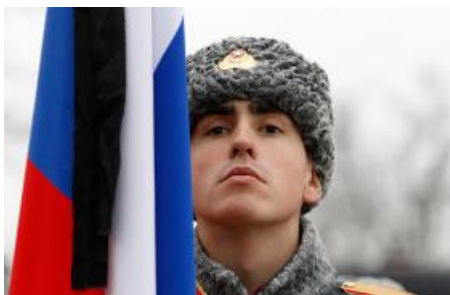
Add to this the fact that some orthodox Sunnis do not consider Alawites rightful Muslims, and it could be a matter of months before radical elements such as al Qaeda start a propaganda war to depict the Syrian conflict as one of "non-Muslim" Alawites killing Muslims. This perception would transform the fighting as well as send sectarian waves across the Middle East's fragile landscape. At the same time, it could lead to the radicalization of Syria, turning the country into a fertile recruitment ground for radical groups.

The sooner the international community is able to help end the killing in Syria, the more likely it will be able to prevent the radicalization of the country's population along sectarian and even religious lines. In Bosnia, after some soul searching, the international community concluded that intervention was the way to end the radicalization of Muslims. What was true in Bosnia appears to also be true in Syria.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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