

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **The Syrian Quagmire** **Ranjit Singh Kalha**

When the wafts of the euphemistically called Arab Spring first drifted over Damascus, the opponents of the Assad regime, along with their Gulf and Western backers, were quick to discern that here lay a chance to dethrone him. The crucial point being that the fall of the Assad regime would land a decisive blow to Iran's political pretensions; cut Hezbollah to size and the more optimistic even surmised that this would hobble Iran's nuclear ambitions. But in the age of instant media, such blatant power plays have to be given a veneer of respectability. What better way to achieve that than to dub this as a struggle for 'democracy' and 'human rights' and the opponents of Bashar al-Assad as being members of the 'free' Syrian army, whose major fighting component is an al-Qaida affiliate; the Jubhat al-Nusra, dubbed by the US in December 2012 as a terrorist organization.

When such a strategy is devised it is always safe to look at the past, as history has an odd habit of repeating itself. In Tunisia, where the Arab Spring first manifested, the Islamist Ennahda party rules but is unable to 'contain' the Salafists, even while opting for a soft Sharia law. The so-called democrats sitting in Tripoli in Libya, put in power by the Western powers, were unable to prevent the horrific murder of US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens. About ten days ago the same 'freedom loving' militiamen in Benghazi, for whom the British and the French had gone to war, murdered 31 Libyans protesting militia rule. Another lot attacked and murdered 38 innocent civilians working at the Amenas gas plant in Algeria. This January the French had to intervene militarily in Mali to prevent further massacres by fighters loyal to the Algerian al-Qaida leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar. In Egypt, the Islamist-led government has appointed Adel al-Khayat, a known Islamist terrorist leader, as the governor of Luxor, a major attraction for the western tourists. Such are the wages of thoughtless action.

Syria is surrounded by five countries. Its borders with Turkey and Jordan are aflame; while those with Iraq and Lebanon are very porous with fighters crossing them without any hindrance. The only peaceful border, at present, is the one with Israel where peace has been maintained for decades. For all their extreme rhetoric and posturing, both the father and son duo of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, gave Israel no major cause for concern and steadfastly maintained peace on the Golan Heights. It was Hafez al-Assad who sent Syrian troops to the Gulf; firstly rally Arab forces opposed to Saddam Hussein of Iraq and secondly to defend the Gulf Emirates and Saudi

Arabia. Later, Syrian troops helped the US to oust Saddam from Kuwait. For Israel it is much better to have Assad ruling in Damascus than to see him being replaced by assorted Islamist jihadis.

Today, Turkey is aflame with large scale internal disturbances aimed at the autocratic rule of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan who has introduced soft Islamism. The Kurdish issue refuses to go away. The Jordanian King survives with the help of about 1,000 US troops stationed in Jordan. The daily horrendous massacres witnessed in Iraq as a result of sectarian battles no longer seem to shock anyone. The Sunni rulers of Bahrain survive the Shiite majority largely due to the presence of Saudi troops. Hezbollah from Lebanon have moved from fighting Israel to join Assad in the sectarian battles being fought in Syria. Meanwhile, Saudi and Qatari money and arms flow uninterruptedly to the Syrian rebels. It is estimated that 93,000 people have died since the out- break of fighting in Syria and a million displaced as refugees.

It is into this cauldron of sectarian strife that the US has entered on the side of the Sunnis by deciding to arm the largely-Sunni rebels fighting against Assad. This decision will only fuel Sunni hubris and Shiite fear. The US public posture that it was doing so because Assad had crossed the 'red-lines' by using chemical weapons against the rebels is a little far-fetched. It is as nebulous as Bush's claim of weapons of mass destruction, just before he decided to invade Iraq in March 2003. This May, the Turkish Security Forces intercepted members of the al-Nusra Front, affiliated to the al-Qaida, with cylinders filled with two kilograms of Sarin gas. The Western powers ignored this information. Mercifully, in a change of tack the in June the Western powers agreed in the G-8 Communiqué that there needs to be an 'objective investigation into reports of the use of chemical weapons.' The pragmatism displayed by President Barack Obama is indeed commendable.

Nevertheless, for the first time in this conflict all the 'friends' of the Western powers are Sunnis ranging from the Arab Gulf Emirates to the vast Sunni hinterland from Morocco to Egypt. The proxy allies are also the same Saudi-Wahhabi Islamist outfits that were responsible for the horrific September 11 attacks. Even the Boston bombers were Sunni Muslims from Chechnya as were the Sunnis that brutally murdered a British soldier in the heart of London. Ranged against them are the Shiite states of Iran and Iraq, the Alawite-led Assad government and the Hezbollah militias.

The real reason for this momentous decision by the US is the fact that after the battle of Qusayr, the Sunni rebels in Syria are in imminent danger of defeat. This would be too humiliating a blow for the Western powers to digest. The feeling is that a revived Assad and a rejuvenated Hezbollah would present an even greater threat to Western interests and Iran would become even more intransigent. Although Sunnis constitute nearly 85 percent of the global Islamic population, it is a strange quirk of geographical oddity that the bulk of the oil resources of the Middle East are found in areas dominated by the Shiites. Southern Iraq, North-East Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Iran are all Shiite dominated and all very richly endowed in oil resources.

At the heart of the matter has been the continuing deep and often bitter US-Iranian estrangement that started almost from the founding of the Islamic Republic and led to US efforts to contain Iranian ambitions. Successive US Administrations have never forgiven the Ayatollahs for overthrowing the Shah and US policies have been based on the presumption of their imminent

demise. The Ayatollahs too have given much cause for US antagonism; dubbing the latter as the 'great Satan.' For lasting peace to return to the Middle East, a US-Iran accommodation is of fundamental importance. President Obama is aware of this, but his problem has always been that deeply held beliefs are ever so difficult to turn. Successive US Presidents have clearly outlined, in numerous National Security Directives issued, that US vital interests in the Middle East consist of [a] the safety and security of Israel and [b] the free and unhindered flow of energy resources from the Gulf. The US would need firm assurances on these two points and will settle for nothing less.

For Iran, the safety and security of the Islamic Republic and the Ayatollah-led regime is of utmost importance. Iran craves for recognition as the leading Muslim State, a protector of Islamic heritage and as a factor of significance in Middle East politics. The solution of the nuclear issue would be a part of this accommodation. The election of Hassan Rouhani as the new President of Iran has opened the door; ever so slightly. The question is: Will the leaders of the two countries seize the opportunity?

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