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SYRIAN PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

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After being mired in long and bloody wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the prospect of yet another U.S. intervention in the Islamic world spurs a range of views not only in the U.S. but also in the Arab world. When it comes to the Syrian uprising, now clearly a bloodbath, opinions on U.S. involvement reflect a broad spectrum. The long-standing authoritarian regime in Syria, currently led by Bashar Al-Assad, consistently portrays the uprising as a Western, U.S.-led conspiracy against the Syrian government. Leaders of the political opposition meanwhile are consistently against direct U.S. or Western intervention in the conflict, though they differ somewhat on the kind of aid or support that they would accept from the U.S. and others. The revolutionaries on the ground in Syria, however, have given up on the hope of rescue by the international community.

THE REGIME'S NARRATIVE

From the earliest days of the uprising, the Assad regime in Syria has derided it as a foreign conspiracy orchestrated by the U.S. and others against the Syrian government. During a commemoration of the 67th anniversary of Syria's independence, a member of Parliament compared the French colonization of Syria to the current "vicious attack led by the U.S. and carried out by Western imperialists" against the Syrian regime.¹ President Bashar Al-Assad expanded on this view during a recent interview with Syrian state television, blaming President Obama and linking Secretary of State John Kerry's recent trip to the Middle East with developments as varied as the Israeli apology to Turkey over the Mavi Marmara incident in 2010, to the formation of a new government in Lebanon. He went so far as to suggest that the U.S. was funding and supporting the "terrorists" fighting against the Assad regime, including Al-Qaeda. He also accused the U.S. of supporting terrorists in Libya but fighting them in Mali—a classic case of America's "double standards." Declaring that "humanitarian intervention's only goal is simply the destruction of the Syrian people," Assad argued that it is the responsibility of the Syrian people to resist the "meekness" that Western powers seek to impose upon them.²

The crux of Assad's depiction of the revolution as a U.S.-led conspiracy against the Syrian government is made clear by his statement: "the United States has historically not accepted that countries have their independence, even in Europe," much less in a "third world" country such as Syria.³ Syria's Ambassador to the UN, Bashar al-Jaafari, recently echoed this characterization of U.S. and Western involvement in Syria by referring to it as a colonial enterprise. In his speech at the UN Security Council in New York, he boldly declared, "Syria will not allow the

¹ SANA News Agency, April 16, 2013, <http://sana.sy/ara/382/2013/04/16/477768.htm>

² SANA News Agency, April 18, 2013, <http://sana.sy/ara/2/2013/04/18/477954.htm>

³ *Ibid*

passage of a second Sykes-Picot at the expense of the people of the region,” referring to the secret agreement between the UK and France that carved up the Ottoman Empire into the modern Middle East. Instead, Syria, he vowed, would be at the “forefront” of the resistance against outside powers, who seek to impose a “new reality” on the Middle East. In this vein, presumably, Al-Jaafari called for a “comprehensive national dialogue” that would bring about a political solution to the conflict in Syria.⁴ Again and again, the Syrian regime has justified its killing and detainment of tens of thousands of people, displacement of millions, and constant shelling and bombardment of villages and towns as a fight against “terrorists,” backed and funded by the U.S. and its allies. To protect Syria and its independence, the narrative goes, the Syrian government has no choice but to engage in this “war” against all those who threaten the stability and well-being of Syria.

THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION’S POSITION(S)

While the Syrian government describes the uprising and pursuant civil war in Syria as a global conspiracy led by the United States, Syrian opposition leaders characterize U.S. involvement in the conflict quite differently. Instead, the popular uprising that started in the south and eventually spread across the entire country has been largely neglected by the U.S. and its Western allies, despite the fact that it has spiraled into a pattern of unrelenting bloodletting. In a recent interview, former president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Moaz Al-Khatib, declared that the Syrian people “are against all foreign intervention,” particularly after the lack of international action to protect the Syrian people, who have been “slaughtered over the past two years.” Any desire to intervene in Syria this late in the game, at a turning point when “the revolution has advanced” so extensively, must be interpreted as an attempt to “rescue the regime,” to do away with the revolution, or to begin geographically dividing up Syria. The only acceptable foreign intervention by countries professing to sympathize with the cause of the Syrian revolution, continued Khatib, would be attempts to “fend off harm to the people” of Syria. For this reason, he explained, he had called on NATO to deploy patriot missiles to protect civilians from government attack.⁵ While both Al-Khatib and Assad warn of Western plans to divide up Syria, the former points to international inertia in the Syrian conflict and the latter sees the U.S. as the grand designer of a global conspiracy against the ruling government.

Recently, a new player to has entered the Syrian political opposition scene by the name of Ghassan Hitto—a Syrian expatriate and U.S. citizen, who has been living in the U.S. for years and was recently elected as the Interim Prime Minister of Syria by the Al-Khatib-led Coalition. In one of his earliest statements following his election as Interim PM, Hitto pledged his commitment to use “all means” available to bring down the Assad regime, working from the “liberated areas” controlled by the Free Syrian Army. Hitto vowed that the Interim Government would work to build up the institutions and infrastructure of the country, as well as to secure aid, humanitarian and otherwise, to the Syrian people struggling against the Assad regime. Hitto also reminded the international community that the uprising in Syria is a “people’s revolution,” calling on the “legal” and “ethical” obligations of the international community to support Syrian people. Thanking countries including Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, members of the EU, and the United States for their financial and political support for the Syrian revolution, Hitto added that the Interim Government needed help in securing the frozen assets of the Assad regime that belong to the Syrian people.⁶ Hitto also called for more extensive Western intervention in Syria, recently appealing to leaders of the G8 to arm the Syrian opposition. He did, however, add that he was not calling on direct NATO intervention, i.e. boots on the ground.⁷ His request was soon after rebuffed by French President Francois Hollande.⁸

It is thus clear that these two main opposition leaders agree on the goal of bringing down the Assad regime, the necessity of protecting civilians, and the rejection of direct foreign intervention, or boots on the ground, in Syria. The difference between them lies in the exact method of ensuring the success of the Free Syrian Army and affiliated groups against the regime. Coalition leader Al-Khatib has refrained as of late from calls for the direct arming and funding of the FSA by foreign powers such as the U.S. In fact, his apparent disillusionment with the lack of

⁴ SANA News Agency, April 18, 2013, <http://sana.sy/ara/3/2013/04/18/478071.htm>

⁵ “The Arab Street,” Dubai Television, March 30, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFdufJlnBw4>

⁶ Ghassan Hitto’s Facebook page, March 19, 2013, accessed April 19, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/President.ghassanhitto?ref=ts&fref=ts>

⁷ “Hitto Calls for Weapons but the ‘8’ are Divided.” 4/10/2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/cbb43c86-3745-44a1-bdb1-7ecee97644e>

⁸ Hollande cited the EU arms embargo against Syria, adding that even when it would expire in May 2013, EU leaders were concerned about the level of control by the political opposition over the armed wing of the opposition. Al Jazeera. March 30, 2013, accessed April 19, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/bb191edd-0e35-4171-b14e-de82c6146b94>

international action finally reached a tipping point, as seen by his recent decision to resign as President of the Coalition, leaving the “cage” of his position, to “follow [his] way to freedom” with the people of Syria.⁹ Al-Khatib’s move came despite announcements by Secretary of State Kerry that the U.S. would double its “non-lethal aid” to the Syrian opposition during a Friends of Syria conference in Istanbul.¹⁰ Soon after Al-Khatib’s announcement, George Sabra—a prominent Christian activist and head of the Syrian National Council—was appointed Interim President until new elections are held in May.¹¹ Sabra’s tone has not been very different from Al-Khatib’s as he has called for quick international action to the “hideous crimes” of the Assad regime against the Syrian people, adding that the involvement of Hezbollah fighters inside Syria is an “act of war.”¹²

Hitto, the Interim Prime Minister, has been more willing to ask for direct assistance to the FSA, although the U.S.’s announcement of increased aid—which clearly did *not* include arms to the FSA—demonstrates a general lack of responsiveness to his calls by the international community. Perhaps for this reason, his more recent public statements have focused more on building institutions for the post-Assad era, as demonstrated by the Facebook post “The Syria of Tomorrow Needs You Today!,” calling on Syrian citizens worldwide to submit their resumes and apply for positions in a new Syrian government.¹³

NOBODY BUT GOD

“Oh God, we have no one but you, Oh God!” (يا الله، مالنا غيرك يا الله!)¹⁴ This familiar protest slogan from the uprising epitomizes the view among Syrian people struggling against the Assad regime that, after a swift NATO intervention in Libya, the world has abandoned Syria and therefore victory can only come from God. Any external initiatives, particularly after two years of bloody repression and destruction by the regime, are viewed by people inside Syria with mistrust and a feeling that the U.S. would only intervene to protect its ally, Israel.¹⁵ To this effect, when Hitto was elected as the new Interim Prime Minister, his selection was challenged by some parts of the Free Syrian Army due to his American citizenship and years spent living in the U.S.¹⁶ Hitto, downplayed the issue, affirming that the new Interim Government pledges its support to the FSA and plans to work with them to topple the Assad regime.¹⁷

This sense of abandonment was reaffirmed by the recent carnage at the hands of the Assad regime in the outskirts of Damascus, in which tens, if not hundreds, of civilians, including women and children, were killed and even burned in their homes.¹⁸ The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar Al-Assad—one of the earliest Facebook pages created to disseminate news about the revolution—declared the international community complicit in the “slaughter” of Syrians by constantly demanding guarantees for the protection of minorities, while ignoring the “obscene oppression against the majority” in Syria.¹⁹ A photo posted on the same page shows a young boy carrying a sign that says, “Drop in the international conscience indicator to its lowest levels with the marked rise of the Assad crime indicator.”²⁰

Statements such as this point to a clear awareness among Syrians that the international community, and particularly the U.S and other Western leaders, are unlikely to intervene directly. Furthermore, this lack of intervention by international actors is seen by Syrian revolutionaries as synonymous with collusion with the Syrian regime against

⁹ Mouaz Al Khatib Al Hasani’s Facebook page, April 21, 2013, accessed April 23, 2013.

<https://www.facebook.com/mouazalkhatib.alhasani>

¹⁰ Al Jazeera. April 23, 2013, accessed April 23, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/6baa9078-e286-4047-982c-7f67443dc380?GoogleStatID=1>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ghassan Hitto’s Facebook page, April 15, 2013, accessed April 19, 2013.

<https://www.facebook.com/President.ghassanhitto?ref=ts&fref=ts>

¹⁴ Coordinating Council of the Syrian Revolution in Jobar, Damascus’s Facebook page. Protest on June 15, 2012, accessed April 19, 2013.

<https://www.facebook.com/Jobar.Revolution>

¹⁵ The argument is that Israel prefers Assad’s stability, particularly along the Golan border with Syria, to the “unknown” that may come after Assad’s downfall. *Al Jazeera*, April 24, 2011, accessed April 23, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/b77a92cf-0d4c-4a7d-80b8-9bae04798674>

¹⁶ Such as General Selim Idriss. *Al Arabiya*, March 24, 2013, accessed April 23, 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/bdy6w2e>

¹⁷ Al Jazeera. March 29, 2013, accessed April 19, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/pages/4b5c3dd2-3989-48c5-ab14-b1590e27bbc4>

¹⁸ *Al Arabiya*. April 20, 2013, accessed April 23, 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/a36d2dw>

¹⁹ The Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page, April 22, 2013, accessed April 23, 2013.

<https://www.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution?fref=ts>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

its people; the U.S. and others are portrayed as having blood on their hands. Indeed, a recent caricature depicts the figure of Uncle Sam carrying a banner reading “human rights” and gagging a figure representing the Free Syrian Army with it, while a scud missile labeled “the Syrian regime” hits the FSA soldier in the back.²¹ The caption below reads, “Human rights as the U.S. sees it! A fear of human rights violations by the FSA after the fall of the gang [the Assad regime], and a lack of interest in the crimes of the Assad gangs!” In other words, the revolutionaries view the U.S. as using its liberal, democratic concerns for human rights as an excuse to ignore Assad’s brutality in what they see as the epitome of hypocrisy. In another caricature, titled “International support for the Syrian opposition,” a double amputee in a wheelchair is being handed a pair of shoes, which he stares at tearfully. The implication, of course, is that international support, such as the “non-lethal aid” pledged by the U.S., is useless to the Syrian opposition, which continues to be mercilessly bombarded.²²



CONCLUSION

The main contrast in the positions on U.S. intervention in Syria exists between the Assad regime’s account and the statements made by various figures in the political opposition. While Hitto and Al-Khatib differed slightly in their willingness to ask for direct NATO assistance or for the U.S. to arm the Free Syrian Army, for instance, they are unified in their goal of bringing down Assad and refusing direct foreign, particularly military, intervention to do so. The Syrian government, for its part, constantly depicts the uprising as orchestrated by the U.S. and other global actors in order to weaken the only remaining bastion of “resistance” against Israel in the Arab world, even though it has clearly maintained the status quo in its relations with Israel over the years. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers continue to debate the prospect of further U.S. intervention in the country, although it appears unlikely that they will respond to Hitto’s calls for support extending beyond “non-lethal aid.” The U.S. position is far from uniform, though some Senators, including John McCain, have been outspoken about the need for the U.S. to directly arm parts of the opposition. These calls have become increasingly fervent, particularly in response to evidence demonstrating that the Assad regime has indeed crossed President Barack Obama’s declared “red line” by using chemical weapons.²³ In fact, since this latest development, there have been murmurs from Washington that the U.S. President is now considering U.S. military options and the possibility of providing lethal aid to the Syrian opposition if concrete evidence is found to corroborate intelligence that chemical weapons have been used in the 2-year-old conflict.²⁴ For now, it is too soon to tell. As the debates continue, the death toll mounts and the country continues to be torn apart, its infrastructure destroyed, its people starved, its children murdered and its women raped. And yet, the revolutionaries inside Syria appear resigned to face Assad’s brutality alone.

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²¹ The Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page, April 22, 2013, accessed April 22, 2013.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152890262365727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1&theater>

²² The Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page, April 21, 2013, accessed April 23, 2013.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152887388860727&set=a.10150397575815727.619133.420796315726&type=1&theater>

²³ *Al Jazeera*, April 25, 2013, accessed April 26, 2013. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/9cb23db7-ac17-4ace-84a4-c26bb3f1a4c8>

²⁴ *Al Quds Al Arabi*, April 30, 2013, accessed May 1, 2013. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=39389>