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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Al Jazeera

## Delaying the Syrian endgame

7/19/2012

Russia is in Syria. *Rusia* (Russia in Arabic) is in *Suria* (Syria); they are made up of the same Arabic letters. The evolving situation is more than a word play for anagrammers. It is a dangerous power play, and while Russia's presence in Syria is being presented as an adversity, it is not devoid of opportunity.

A devil's advocate argument sees Russia's role as a silver lining, ominously gaining momentum as Syria is now in the throes of a civil war, an indigenous battle for liberation from authoritarianism.

There are four compelling arguments for letting Russia do what it does best: preventing liberal intervention in Syria.

### 1. Self-liberation as self-mastery

The famed Muslim commander Saladin - whose resting place is in Damascus - and Yusuf al-Azmah, resistance hero of anti-French colonialism, would agree with the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) daring "Damascus volcano" operation.

Throughout the Arab Spring, wresting capital cities from the grip of dictators has been the key to victory. The push has both military and psychological significance. Militarily, it places the Assads on the defensive. In particular, the Wednesday operation that killed some of Assad's top generals, including Defence Minister Daoud Rajha, and General Assef Shawkat, President Assad's brother-in-law, is a huge blow to the regime's killing machine.

Psychologically, the operation adds to the woes of the Assads following this month's defection of General Manaf Tlass to France. The Wednesday blast chips into the regime's delusional confidence about its invincibility.

On this front, there is an enigma in the blast that killed three top-ranking commanders. It is puzzling why a regime under duress and noted for its secrecy would rush to advertising the blast, knowing very well it would provide a psychological boost to the FSA. Now, however - regardless of who is responsible - the regime may be able to conveniently blame them for the atrocities of the past 18 months.

In the final scheme of things, Russia's intransigence and objection to intervention in Syria may be unwittingly proving its use: strengthening the Syrian people's resolve to self-liberate and the FSA to operate accordingly, relying on indigenous resources.

Since Islam was brought to Damascus in 635, the city has many times relied on its local resources for liberating itself.

## **2. Avoiding a repeat of Libya**

There are lessons to be learned in Syria from the intervention in Libya. Probably the most important of these lessons is that in the absence of a political programme, effective leadership, civil and civic capacity-building, and a quasi "government-in-waiting", the end of military hostilities are marked by the start of disarray, schisms and internecine fighting.

The killings that followed the collapse of the Gaddafi regime were horrendous and undermined the military victory. Russian intransigence, one of the key factors blocking Western intervention, is adversity when one accounts for the human rights violations committed by the regime and the rising spiral of violence and counter-violence. However, it is equally an opportunity for the opposition to bide its time and get organised.

The opposition has been vociferous about the necessity of change and reform in Syria after the Assads. However, it remains an inchoate project given its divisions and lack of shared values and political strategies.

More importantly, as the military push towards Damascus gains momentum (which, though it does not mean regime collapse is imminent, it is clearly inevitable, possibly in a matter of months) - the need for generating military-political synergy is imperative. Right now the military initiative risks superseding the political operation.

Without synergy that levels the playing field between the commanders on the ground and the leadership, the opposition could find itself with limited political capital, especially if the Assads' collapse is due mostly to the FSA's military operations. Should the Syrian army collapse and more units join the FSA, the military will emerge as important stakeholders in post-Assad Syria. Ideally, politics will rein in the military side of liberation and transition in Syria.

The Syrian National Council (SNC) has been dogged by divisions and even claims of lack of democratic management. An awesomely challenging task facing SNC leader Abd al-Basit Sida and his comrades-in-arms is to reach out to all opposition organisations, and to do this without too much reliance on outside mentoring or guardianship. Tribal divisions have slowed Libya's transition, as have its armed militias.

Transition in Syria demands a great deal of preparatory work at this crucial stage before the regime collapses. In particular, sectarian pluralism must be converted into democratic capital, thus preventing it from derailing a smooth transition once the Assads are out of the way. One particularly important lesson from Libya is for the Syrian government-in-waiting to develop a vision for transitional justice given the grotesque human rights violations already committed and the potential for revenge by the victims.

### **3. Indigeneity and the Arab Spring**

The Arab Spring has largely been home-grown, especially in Egypt and Tunisia, where it has unfolded with no need for outside intervention. The intervention in Libya is the exception: without NATO's operations, Gaddafi would have prolonged his rule, giving him enough time to commit additional crimes against the Libyan people.

There is no "free lunch" in international politics. So Russia's role in the Syrian crisis without a doubt has downsides. However, one of its unintended outcomes is that the Arab Spring is spared further intervention and meddling by outside powers.

Freedom is never given, and it is better when earned through indigenous resources and energy, which abound in Syria. The cost has so far been high in human lives, and this is very regrettable. It would have, however, been even higher if more potent weapons, including surgical operations, had been used by NATO or UN-mandated forces.

### **4. International security**

Russia's role may unwittingly turn out to be helpful for those thinking about the chemical weapons stockpiles possessed by the Syrian regime. Sudden regime collapse, resulting from a conflict with Western powers, is no guarantee these weapons will not be used, and they could potentially fall into the hands of non-state actors who could potentially use or trade them.

In the wrong hands, such weapons can be lethal, especially if there is little knowledge of their whereabouts and numbers.

The Russians themselves have sophisticated weapons in its Tartus base, and Russia must be eager to secure these - either for repossession or destruction - as Moscow increasingly comes to grips with the coming expiry of the Assad dynasty.

## **What now...**

Russia's role in the Syrian miasma must not be assumed to be fixed. Both the Assads and the Russians seem to be locked in a moment of desperation: the end of their role in Syria. However, that is where their company ends. Russia is a global player that can reconfigure and reproject its power. The Assads have no horizon, and that makes them expendable.

Russia will know to drop the Assads when the alarm bells of the endgame are sounded. Russia has not done that as quickly as the world wants it to, but that may in the big scheme of things prove to be an opportunity, not just an adversity.