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Syria: A jihadi paradise

By Pepe Escobar

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So Bashar al-Assad hath martially spoken - for the first time in seven months - predictably blaming the Syrian civil war on "terrorists" and "Western puppets".

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, he of the former "zero problems with our neighbors" policy, commented that Assad only reads the reports of his secret services. C'mon, Ahmet; Bashar may be no Stephen Hawking, but he's certainly getting his black holes right.

Assad, moreover, has a plan: a national dialogue leading to a national charter - to be submitted to a referendum - and then an enlarged government and a general amnesty. The problem is who is going to share all this bottled happiness because Assad totally dismisses the new Syria opposition coalition as well as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), describing them as foreign-recruited gangs taking orders from foreign powers to implement one supreme agenda: the partition of Syria.

Still, Assad's got a plan. First stage: all foreign powers financing the "terrorists" - as in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization-Gulf Cooperation Council compound - must stop doing so. That's already a major no-no. Only in a second stage would the Syrian Army cease all its operations, but still reserve the right to respond to any - inevitable - "provocation".

Assad's plan does not mention what happens to Assad himself. The only thing the multiple strands of the opposition agree on is that "the dictator must go" before any negotiations take place. Yet he wants to be a candidate to his own succession in 2014.

As if this was not a humongous "detail" torpedoing the whole construct of current UN mediator Lakhdar Brahimi, there's still the crucial nagging point of Brahimi insisting on including the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in a Syrian transitional government. Brahimi should know better. It's as if the UN was praying for a Hail Mary pass - that is, Assad's voluntary abdication.

This ain't Tora Bora

If you want to know what's really going in Syria, look no further than Hezbollah secretary-general Sheikh Nasrallah. He does tell it like it is.

Then there's what Ammar al-Musawi, Hezbollah's number 3 - as in their de facto foreign minister - told my Italian colleague Ugo Tramballi. The most probable post-Assad scenario, if there is one, will be "not a unitary state, but a series of emirates near the Turkish border, and somebody proclaiming an Islamic state". Hezbollah's intelligence - the best available on Syria - is adamant: "one third of the combatants in the opposition are religious extremists, and two-thirds of the weapons are under their control." The bottom line - this is a Western proxy war, with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) acting as a "vanguard" for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Asia Times Online readers have already known this for eons, as much as they know about the tectonic-plates-on-the-move fallacy of GCC autocracies promoting "democracy" in Syria. While the geologically blessed House of Saud has bribed every grain of sand in sight to be immunized against any whiff of Arab Spring, at least in Kuwait the winds of change are forcing the Al-Sabah family to accept a prime minister who is not an emir's puppet. Yes, petromonarchs; sooner or later you're all going down.

As for those who ignore Musawi, they do it at their own peril; blowback is and will remain inevitable, "like in Afghanistan". Musawi adds, "Syria is not Tora Bora; it's on the Mediterranean coast, close to Europe". Syria in the 2010s is the 1980s Afghan remix - with exponential inbuilt blowback.

And for those who blindly follow the blind in repeating that Hezbollah is a "terrorist" organization, Hezbollah is closely cooperating with the UN - on the ground with over 10,000 blue helmets, under the command of Italian General Paolo Serra - to keep southern Lebanon free from Syrian civil war contamination.

The dictator has fallen – again

Not surprisingly, that motley crew branded as the "Syrian opposition" rejected Assad en bloc. For the Muslim Brotherhood - the self-styled power in waiting - he is a "war criminal" who should go on trial. For Georges Sabra, the vice-president of that American-Qatari concoction, the National Coalition, Assad's words were a "declaration of war against the Syrian people".

Predictably, the US State Department - not yet under John Kerry - said Assad was "detached from reality". London said it was all hypocrisy and immediately launched yet another "secret" two-day conference this week at Wilton Park in West Sussex mingling coalition members with

the usual gaggle of "experts", academics, GCC officials and "multilateral agencies". The spectacularly pathetic UK Foreign Secretary William Hague twitted - for the umpteenth time - that "Assad's departure from power is inevitable".

Facts on the ground though spell that Assad is not going anywhere anytime soon.

As for British claims that "the international community can provide support to a future transitional authority", that doesn't cut much slack among war-weary informed Syrians - who know this civil war has been funded, supplied and amply coordinated by the West, as in the NATO component of the NATOGCC compound.

They smell a - Western - rat in the obsessive characterization of everything in Syria as a sectarian war, as they see how loads of influent Sunnis have remained loyal to the government.

They smell a - Western - rat when they look back and see this whole thing started just as the US\$10 billion Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline (crucially bypassing NATO member Turkey) had a chance to be implemented. This would represent a major economic boost to an independent Syria, an absolute no-no as far as Western interests are concerned.

The Obama 2.0 administration - and Israel - would be more than comfortable with the MB in power in Syria, following the Egyptian *modus operandi*. The Brotherhood promotes the idea of a "civil state"; one just has to check the few "liberated areas" across Syria to detect rebel civility inbuilt in hardcore Sharia law and assorted beheadings.

Yet what the NATOGCC compound and Israel really want is a Yemeni model for Syria; a military dictatorship without the dictator. What they're getting instead, for the foreseeable future, is Jihadi Paradise.

Off with their heads

Almost a year ago, al-Qaeda number one Ayman al-Zawahiri called on every Sunni hardcore faithful from Iraq and Jordan to Lebanon, Turkey and beyond to take a trip to Syria and merrily crush Assad.

So they've kept coming, including - just like in Afghanistan - Chechens and Uyghurs and Southeast Asians, joining everything from the FSA to Jabhat al-Nusra, the number one killing militia, now with over 5,000 jihadis.

A report published this week by the London-based counterterrorism outfit Quilliam Foundation confirms Al-Nusra's role. The lead author of the report, Noman Benotman, happens to be a former Libyan jihadi very cosy with al-Zawahiri and the late "Geronimo", aka Osama bin Laden.

Al-Nusra is in fact the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the terrorist brand of late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, also known as Islamic State of Iraq after Zarqawi was incinerated by a US missile in 2006. Even the State Department knows that AQI emir Abu Du'a runs both AQI and al-Nusra, whose own emir is Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani.

It's AQI that facilitates the back-and-forth of Iraqi commanders - with plenty of fighting

experience on the ground against the Americans - to sensitive areas in Syria, while the Syrians, Iraqis and Jordanians at al-Nusra also work the phones to extract funding from Gulf sources. Al-Nusra wants - what else - an Islamic State not only in Syria but all over the Levant. Favorite tactic: car and truck suicide bombings as well as remote-controlled car bombs. For the moment, they keep a tense collaboration/competition regime with the FSA.

What happens next? The new Syrian National Coalition is a joke. Those GCC bastions of democracy are now totally spooked by the jihadi tsunami. Russia drew the red line and NATO won't dare to bomb; Russians and Americans are now discussing details. And sooner or later Ankara will see the writing on the wall - and revert to a policy of at least minimizing trouble with the neighbors.

Assad saw The Big Picture - clearly, thus his "confident" speech. It's now Assad against the jihadis. Unless, or until, the new CIA under Terminator John Brennan drones itself into the (shadow war) picture with a vengeance.