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Assessing the Conflict in Syria and Egypt – The Wars Continue

By Ramzy Baroud

December 25, 2013

2013 has expectedly been a terrible year for several Arab nations. It has been terrible because the promise of greater freedoms and political reforms has been reversed, most violently in some instances, by taking a few countries down the path of anarchy and complete chaos. Syria and Egypt are two cases in point.

Syria has been hit the hardest. For months, the United Nations has maintained that over 100,000 people have been killed in the 33 months of conflict. More recently, the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights concluded that at least 125,835, of which more than third of them are civilians, have been killed.

The UN's humanitarian agency (OCHA) says that millions of Syrians living in perpetual suffering are in need of aid, and this number will reach 9.3 million by the end of next year.

OCHA's numbers attempt to forecast the need for aid for the year 2014. However, that estimation reflects an equally ill-omened political forecast as well. There are currently 2.4 million Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. The number will nearly double to 4.1 million by the conclusion of next year. Considering the growing political polarization between the Syrian parties involved in the conflict, and their regional and international backers, there is little hope that the conflict will die away in the near future.

In fact, the simple narrative of a conflict between a central government and an opposition is no longer applicable, since the opposition is itself fragmented into many parties, some with extreme religious agendas. The early discourse that accompanied the Syrian conflict, that of freedom, democracy and such is also of little relevance, considering the level of brutalities and the multiple objectives declared by the various fighting forces. But for Syrians, it is a lose-lose situation.

Syrians involved in this war understand well that a prolonged conflict could mean that the country faces the risk of complete breakdown, and that a Somalia or an Afghanistan scenario is in the offing. Then, few would even care to remember the original reasons of why the war started in the first place, as several generations of Syrian refugees would be doomed to live the same fate as the unending Palestinian refugee experience.

However, there is a glimmer of hope. The recently signed landmark deal between Iran and six other countries – the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany – could in fact usher in at least the mere possibility of resorting to dialogue in resolving the crisis in Syria. True, the deal was related to Iran's nuclear program, but since all of these countries are active participants in the Syrian war, with much influence over the warring parties, their consent would be necessary for future dialogue between Damascus and the opposition to bear fruit.

A major question however will continue to surface: even if the secular Syrian opposition agrees to a future arrangement with the current Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, will that have any bearings on other extremist forces fighting their own cause? Even with the most optimistic assessments, the Syrian conflict is unlikely to be settled in 2014.

The same assessment is also relevant in the case of Egypt. In 2013, the conflict in Egypt has taken on a different dimension, although most media (Arab and international) are so saturated by half-truths and/or intentional misinformation. It is almost impossible to reach a level-headed understanding of what is transpiring in the most populated Arab country.

One main reason behind the confusion is that reporting on the Jan 25, 2011 revolution was overly sentimental and simplified. In some aspects, the bad guys vs. good guys scenario continues to define the Egyptian turmoil. The Egyptian media is a prime example of that. Since the well-orchestrated June 29 protest, followed by a military coup in July 03, some secular forces affiliated with the revolution lined up in support of the very forces affiliated with the deposed Mubarak regime. Both camps united in opposition of a government affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) – itself affiliated with the revolution. It gets more convoluted still, since the Islamic Salafist al-Nour Party has no problem siding with the military, in support of its newly drafted constitution, although it was al-Nour that tirelessly lobbied for a Sharia-driven constitution under the leadership of deposed President Mohammed Morsi. It was that kind of pressure that drove many secularist parties away from the committee that attempted to draft an earlier constitution, leaving the MB isolated. Al-Nour and secularist parties are now standing in the same political camp.

'Dirty politics' doesn't even begin to describe what has befallen Egypt, for the violent dimension of this politicking is unknown in the modern history of the country. Nearly 20,000 Egyptians are

now sentenced or facing trials for belonging or supporting the ‘wrong’ political camp. The military-backed government is now unleashing a ‘legal onslaught’, freeing those who affiliated with the Mubarak regime and imprisoning those affiliated with the MB. On Dec. 21, the toppled president Morsi was referred by Egyptian prosecutors to a third criminal trial on "charges of organizing prison breaks during the 2011 uprising, spreading chaos and abducting police officers in collaboration with foreign militants," reported the Associated Press.

Brotherhood lawyer Mohammed el-Damati described the purpose of all of this as an attempt to defeat every single achievement of the January revolution. "They are going over Jan. 25, 2011, with an eraser," he said. But will they succeed?

While the military enjoys a great sway over every facet of power in Egypt, the Egyptian people are no longer passive participants. Reversing the achievement of the revolution will not necessarily affect the collective mindset that gave the Egyptian people the kind of zeal that made them stand and fight for their rights. No military diktats or legal maneuvering can erase that. 2014 is likely to be a year in which the nature of the conflict in Egypt changes from that of military vs. MB, into a non-elitist conflict that surpasses all of this into something else, perhaps a struggle that will recapture the spirit of the first revolution.