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Assad's staying power on show

By Nicola Nasser

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Long gone are the days when the so-called "Friends of Syria" could plausibly claim that two thirds of Syria was controlled by rebel forces, that Damascus was under siege and that the days of President Bashar al-Assad were numbered.

The war has taken a U-turn during the past year and Assad firmly holds the military initiative. The long-awaited foreign military intervention did not take off, and both Syrian and non-Syrian insurgents are on the run.

The official Syrian Arab Army (SAA), which was strategically organized and stationed to fight a regular war in defense against the Israeli occupying power in the western south of the country, was initially taken by surprise following the 2011 uprising by attacks on its civilian backyard.

Within a relatively short period of time, however, the SAA succeeded in containing the initial attack, in adapting trained units to unconventional guerrilla war in cities and in winning over the support of the civilian population, without acceding any ground of its defense against Israel. Ever since, the SAA has been gaining more ground, liberating more civilian centers from insurgent terrorists and closing more border crossing points used for infiltration of foreign fighters into the country.

Damascus, more than 95% of the common borders with Lebanon and the central heart of Syria

around Homs are now secured. Except for the northern city of Raqqa, there is no place in Syria where the insurgents can claim exclusive control.

The declared goal of the United States', Saudi, Qatari and Turkish financial, military and logistical support for the insurgents was always "regime change". To achieve this, they had claimed to be extending support to what they described as "moderate" insurgents. However, "moderate" rebels are a rare species in the Syrian insurgency. The lines are now strictly drawn between homeland defense and foreign intervention. On one side are national forces and on the other international terrorists.

There is a choice between an existing secular and civil state, and a future state perceived to be governed by an extremist or at best moderate version of Islamist ideology. The latter would also be supported by backward, tribal and undemocratic regional states with similar sectarian ideologies.

During his testimony at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on September 3, 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry denied that the "moderate" Syrian rebels had been infiltrated by al-Qaeda terrorists.

"[The] opposition has increasingly become more defined by its moderation, more defined by the breadth of its membership, and more defined by its adherence to some, you know, democratic process and to an all-inclusive, minority protecting constitution, which will be broad-based and secular with respect to the future of Syria," Kerry testified.

However, hard facts on the ground in Syria as well as statements by other US high ranking officials suggest Kerry's testimony was politically motivated, and far from the truth.

Last March, General David Rodriguez, head of the US Africa Command, testified before the House Armed Services Committee that "Syria has become a significant location for al-Qaeda-aligned groups to recruit, train, and equip extremists."

The previous month, James Clapper, the US director of national intelligence, called Syria a "huge magnet" for Islamic extremists in testimony prepared for the Senate intelligence committee.

Last January, Clapper also told a Senate intelligence hearing that "training complexes" for foreign fighters were spotted in Syria and chair of the Senate intelligence committee Dianne Feinstein described Syria as "the most notable new security threat in the year" since the committee's last meeting.

Matthew Olsen, director of the US government's National Counterterrorism Center, was on record to say that "Syria has become the predominant jihadist battlefield in the world."

It seems the Americans and their Saudi and Turkish allies are left with the only option of artificially creating artificial "moderates", whom they unrealistically and wishfully dream of

turning into a credible force on the ground.

US President Barack Obama seems to have pursued recently a two-pronged diplomatic and military policy as part of his efforts to mend fences with Saudi Arabia, a persistent advocate of war and militarization in Syria.

Diplomatically, he closed the Syrian embassy and consulates in the United States and restricted the movement of the Syrian envoy to the United Nations as a confidence-building measure ahead of his visit to the kingdom on March 28.

Militarily, he promised more arms to Syrian "moderate" rebels during his visit. After the visit he was reportedly considering arming those rebels with more advanced weaponry, including anti-aircraft missiles.

Israel's Debkafile website on this April 7 reported that two moderate Syrian rebel militias - the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Revolutionary Front - have been supplied with advanced US weapons, including armor-piercing, optically guided BGM-71 TOW missiles.

Images of rebels equipped with these arms have begun to circulate in recent days. Both militias are coordinating and cooperating with the al-Qaeda offshoot the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, both listed as terrorist groups by the US, Saudi Arabia Syria and Iraq.

Time for the US to reconsider

Within this context, existing Central Intelligence Agency-led programs in Jordan for training pre-approved "moderates" will likely be expanded.

However, Charles Lister, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Center in Qatar, on April 3 wrote that "it would take close to two years to produce a force" that could numerically rival the extremist "Ahrar al-Sham" group and "it would take seven years" to create a force that could rival the extremist "Islamic Front".

This suggests that it is about time US policy makers reconsidered their approach to Syria and started dealing with the facts on the ground - instead of yielding to the bullying of their regional allies who continue to beat the drums of war to survive a tidal wave of change.

This is why Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are sponsoring an Islamist counterrevolution. The Muslim Brotherhood International (MBI) was a version of this alternative. Unfortunately the US got along with it. The MBI plan in Egypt has proved counterproductive. Its failure in Egypt pre-empted for good any hope for its success in Syria. The ensuing rift among the anti-Syria allies doomed the plan regionally.

President Assad's statement on this April 7 that the "project of political Islam" has failed was not overoptimistic or premature. Neither was the statement of his ally, the leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, on the same day that "the phase of bringing down the regime or

bringing down the (Syrian) state is over... They cannot overthrow the regime, but they can wage a war of attrition.”

The US campaign for "regime change" in Syria has created only a magnet for international terrorism, and a black hole for Saudi, Qatari and Turkish military, financial and logistical support.

Peaceful protesters were quickly sidelined to oblivion in the Syrian uprising. More than three years of bloodshed left no room for moderates. US and Western calls for Syrian President al-Assad to step down is now a faint cry that can hardly be heard.

All global and regional indicators underline how Assad is there to stay. Change will come only under his leadership or his guidance. The sooner the United States realizes this the better for all concerned parties.