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The Syrian nation is victim of the Cold War

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On February 24, Tunisia hosted the “Friends of Syria” conference, in the presence of foreign ministers of western powers including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Though officially Russia has been invited, it has firmly declined, claiming it was not informed who would attend or what the agenda would be. Russia doubts the aims of the conference, suspecting that the main objective is to set up a coalition to support one side of the internal conflict, as happened with Libya. Thus Russia has adopted the Syrian regime’s position, even though the US has declared it has no intention to intervene militarily. The US warns that elements connected with Al-Qaeda may infiltrate into the rebels’ ranks, and refuses to arm the Free Syrian Army saying that the identity of the rebels cannot be ascertained.

The results are cruel and inhuman. Syria’s cities are being pounded to dust in a completely one-sided war as the army, equipped with modern weapons, turns its full destructive strength on the civilian population and on rebels who deserted the army with their own personal weapons. The revolt even reached the heart of Damascus, Al-Maza, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the capital whose residents can no longer bear what is taking place in Homs, especially the Baba Amr district where humanity has shown to what depths of cruelty it can sink. Thus the surreal narrative peddled by the regime, which claimed the revolt is being staged by armed gangs directed from abroad and terrorizing the population, is coming apart at the seams. The killing of Sunday Times journalist Marie Colvin in Baba Amr was too much for the west, and put the regime’s atrocities against its own people at the center of the western media’s discourse.

The Cold War

The Chinese and Russian veto against the Arab initiative, brought to the UN Security Council, heightened the tension between Russia and the US. The results were clearly felt in Homs. The regime wants to prevail with Russian support and thus contribute to bringing down the US, which supports the rebels. The price of this war between superpowers is being paid by the Syrian people, whose only demand is democracy and social justice. But Putin’s regime, which privatized the Soviet market and divided the spoils gratis among the new oligarchs, perceives Assad as a strategic regional ally for Moscow’s imperialist aspirations. This alliance continues the traditional close alliance between the Soviet regime and Syria, though the ideological basis for the alliance has been dropped, and both countries are capitalist. Of course, the current alliance is not just based on tradition, but on military and geopolitical interests which were inherited by Putin’s Russia from the Soviet period. One example is the Tartus Port, which according to agreements between Russia and Syria is to undergo improvements and serve Russian warships after 2012. If Assad falls, these agreements will fall too.

Thus, as the west tries to assure its regional hegemony by isolating Iran and bringing down Assad, Russia creates an oppositional Middle Eastern axis which includes Iraq, Iran and Syria. The Shiite character of this triangular axis cannot be ignored. The new player is Iraq, Syria’s former sworn enemy, whose interests have changed since the Baath regime was toppled by the American occupation and the rise of a Shiite hegemony in Iraq. The Shiite majority is waging a determined battle against the Sunni minority, and it fears that Syria’s Sunni majority may get the upper hand. Thus Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki supports Bashar Assad, representative of the Allawi minority. For this reason the Americans are hesitant to intervene militarily, even though Syria has become the focal point of conflict

between the US and Russia – they have seen how the regime they set up in Iraq turned against them just a few months after they left.

The common ground between the three Shiite regimes is not merely religious affiliation. They are all dictatorial and corrupt, with an elite which enjoys the rich fruits of the economy while the people live in poverty and backwardness. They are all waging a kind of civil war, openly violent in Iraq and Syria and still latent in Iran. This axis is fighting a rearguard battle against the Arab Spring which has already led to profound changes in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen. To perceive the violence in Syria as a war between superpowers alone would be to miss an important aspect: the Syrian uprising stems from deep issues which neither Russia nor the Syrian regime can deny.

The Syrian uprising

In his attempts to rebuff criticism, and in keeping with Russian advice, Assad announced he would hold a referendum on a new constitution which would cancel the Baath Party's standing as the ruling party, and hold presidential elections within 90 days. However, the new constitution does not ensure democracy or recognize an opposition; its main aim is to give the impression of change while the massacres continue unabated in Syria's streets.

Syria's popular uprising will not stop regardless of the level of cruelty Assad directs against the people. The uprising may be supported by dark regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which are wary of Iran, but it draws its main strength from the achievements of citizens in Egypt and Tunisia which brought down the tyrants and held democratic elections for the first time in 60 years. What we see in Syria is no less than a regional earthquake which is shaking the Arab regimes. This earthquake is loosing powerful social forces which took shape during decades of oppression, poverty and corruption and are now demanding radical political, economic and social change in the face of a regime which churned out empty religious and nationalist slogans.

To better understand the nature of the uprising, we must look at the demonstrations in Moscow, Athens, Rome, Madrid and New York. The Arab Spring is a global spring which demands a change of agenda for a world whose citizens have been denied their basic right to decide the fate of their own nation and ensure their future. Today, Germany dictates what Europe's residents must do and what economic regime they must adopt in order to save its banks. America tries to impose an economic system which has brought the world to the brink, and is compelled to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan – wars which cost the lives of some 6,000 American soldiers and three trillion dollars. The existing social economic system is collapsing, and citizens around the world are taking to the streets to reclaim power from the hands of the tycoons who took over the economy and politics. The declining superpowers are unable to stop this process or channel it in other directions.

Support for the Syrian uprising and the removal of the Syrian despot, and the demand for an immediate end to the massacres in Homs, are not merely humanist acts but political and revolutionary acts against Russian imperialism and American imperialism alike. Colonialism's time has gone, and the superpowers can no longer direct history according to their whims. Citizens have lost their fear because they have nothing left to lose except their chains. The birth pangs of the new era are hard to bear, and the price paid by the Syrian people for liberation from the murderous dictatorship is almost inconceivable. But the regime's unrestrained cruelty and suppression merely accelerates its collapse, and Assad's fate will be the fate of the dictators that came before him, from Louis XVI in 18th-century France, via the Russian Tsar of the 20th century, to the despots of our own times.

Post-scriptum :

Translated from the Hebrew by Yonatan Preminger

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