



MIDDLE EAST ARMED CONFLICTS SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The Debate Over Syria Has Reached a Dead End

Two warring narratives now dominate discussions—and neither is sufficient.

By Bassam Haddad

OCTOBER 18, 2016



A member of the Syrian Civil Defense, the White Helmets, runs in a rebel-held market district in Aleppo, Syria, October 12, 2016. (*Reuters / Abdalrhman Ismail*)

By now, those following the heart-wrenching news from Syria have been saturated with data, analysis, information, and misinformation on developments there since 2011. Many of us have adopted our disparate narratives. This is the case whether we have been observing Syria over the past two decades or whether we suddenly started paying attention in 2011. Unfortunately, in light of the contentious nature of received knowledge on the country, especially under the current conditions, such crystallization is invariably open to doubt or plausible counterargument.

Worse still, there has been increasing gravitation toward two mutually exclusive narratives: (a) that of “pure and consistent revolution,” and (b) that of “external conspiracy.” Both narratives carry grains of truth, but both are encumbered by maximalist claims and fundamental blind spots that forfeit any common ground necessary for enduring cease-fires or potential transitions, as well as postwar reconciliation.

These divisions have crystallized at research institutions, think tanks, and policy circles; among artists and journalists; and at media outlets and satellite television stations in the Middle East, which often portray a caricature of their preferred narrative. The debates occur everywhere—including in kitchen-table

discussions within families and among friends—but with different intonations, intensity, and immediacy. The exceptions, ironically and refreshingly, are Syrians living in Syria, who are far more exhausted by these and indeed all narratives, and have on average a much more grounded point of view born out of intense suffering and proximity to what has become a theater of extreme cruelty.

The target of this essay will be less the policy aspects of this debate and the options regarding greater US intervention, and more the broader discursive realm within which debates occur, particularly in online platforms. Policy and narratives are often connected, even if opportunistically and with a time-lag, which is all the more reason to take narratives, especially the most prevalent ones, seriously. Since my aim is to avoid yet another round of counterproductive personal polemics, I will refrain from associating particular individuals or institutions with the two narratives. Instead, my goal is to contribute to the restoration of some discursive accountability and nuance.

ADVERTISING



To be sure, there is some internal divergence on issues within these narratives, which explains some flip-flopping, especially after the solidification of the jihadist component of the uprising. But the focus here is on the core claims around which narratives are woven.

The first narrative asserts the purity and consistency of a revolution that started in 2011. This revolution, the narrative goes, seeks the removal of a brutal dictatorship in favor of a more accountable and just order. Many of its adherents recognize the problem of militarization and radicalization in the uprising, and even of problematic external interventions on that side. However, such dynamics are not allowed to impinge on the nature of the revolution. In this view, no degree of militarization, radicalization, or sectarianism of the uprising is enough to fundamentally change its

potential in securing a more accountable and just order in Syria. This narrative thus acknowledges that various jihadists are practically spearheading the fight against the Assad regime on the battlefield. Yet it simultaneously either denounces their worldview or writes them off as a product of repression, in both cases distancing “the revolution” from jihadists. This narrative may also decry the subordination of the official representatives of the revolution to Arab Gulf states and Turkey, and by connection the United States, including their role in funding or facilitating the entry of jihadists into Syria. Yet it does not recognize the implications of doing so. The revolution is always said to be able to emerge unscathed, and rejection of this claim is dismissed as akin to betrayal.

The second narrative recognizes the repression of the regime and the need for change. Its adherents often even recognize the legitimacy of protest, at least in theory. Yet when it comes to the actual uprising, they only see external conspiracy and internal jihadists. In this narrative, the rest of the protesters either fade into an irrelevant background or are brought to the fore as stooges of problematic external actors. Accordingly, there are no secular, anti-imperialist Syrians who are still working, one way or another, to overthrow the regime. They either do not exist or are too few to be counted. Concomitantly, this narrative makes the

regime's destruction of Syria less visible by its descriptive privileging of the imperialist forces that benefit from such destruction. Some go so far as to put the regime's scale of destruction on par with that of the much weaker rebels. In this view, Syria is not only a theater for regional and international conflict; it is also where external designs must be defeated, no matter the cost to Syrians themselves. Participating in the opposition thus becomes a form of betrayal against anti-imperialism (and the nation itself).

Both narratives fail to recognize the legitimate aspects of their counterpart. Adherents of both narratives refuse to allow facts and developments to alter their views. Both adopt hypocritical stances regarding intervention. According to the first narrative, US intervention is good only if it is against the regime. For the second narrative, external intervention is good if it supports the regime—Russia is not imperialist, but the United States is, the argument goes. For the first narrative, the potential dangers resulting from state collapse is a moot point. Yet for the second narrative, state collapse is unacceptable no matter how bad things get. On the question of state collapse (as distinguished from regime overthrow), neither position is based on weighted analysis or a consideration of consequences. Instead, both start with an assumption about which side must be defeated, and both reverse-engineer the

argument that suits that end. Usually, the first narrative is associated with the West and the second narrative with the regime, with all sorts of “incriminating” implications. And finally, neither side seems open to compromise: Nothing less than complete defeat of either the regime or the opposition is acceptable, forfeiting thereby a number of potential exits from the mayhem.

* * *

Total triumph by one side will not restore well-being to Syria. The country will not be at peace without taking into account the aspirations of the majority of its citizens, whatever their affiliations or preferences. Thus, despite the moral and political conviction of their adherents, neither of these narratives—at least so long as a maximalist version is advanced—is sufficient to bring Syria back from the brink. National reconciliation is a messy and often unsatisfying business, judging from dozens of historical examples. Both sides go too far in discounting the imperfections of any future formula, which explains today’s costly intransigence. Those who take any of this as an argument for moral equivalence between the oppressor and the oppressed are fixated on apolitical, ideal types.

More nuanced approaches exist, to be sure, but their proponents are usually dismissed by both sides as either traitors to the revolution, politically naive, pro-regime, pro-West, or even pro-jihadist. Sometimes the phrase “pro-opposition” is sufficiently damning for adherents of the second narrative because of the identity of the actors who support the opposition. Similarly, according to the first narrative, not toeing the line of the current opposition is tantamount to supporting Bashar al-Assad.

Amid this poisonous atmosphere, observers are either forced to choose a side or are considered wishy-washy by both sides. One, it seems, is not allowed to be critical of the opposition from a vehemently anti-regime perspective. Equally, one cannot be for the opposition without being lumped into what is variously branded as the “pro-Western imperialist,” the “pro-Zionist,” or the “pro-jihadist” camp (or all three at once, despite the contradictions). The chief irony, however, is that we all pretend to be speaking on behalf of nearly all Syrians, when in reality most Syrians—those who labor day and night to keep their communities functioning—are far more nuanced than either of these two camps.

Some who advocate a middle ground may not be saying much, since there is, at least at present, no institutional or social-political conduit for their position. But we should not be seeking an apolitical, abstract middle

ground. Rather, a conception of an exit that preserves all groups in Syria, regardless of their preferences, is the only way out of the standoff. And that requires a generosity or flexibility of vision that neither of the two narratives seems capable of at the moment.

This essay will address the two dominant trends as a way of opening up possibilities for outcomes that may be the best solution to the crisis. Those outcomes will necessarily be suboptimal, since genuine reconciliation is, at least at this point, an illusion.

BLAME-GAME NARRATIVES

Amid the bombs and the killing, many continue to bicker about responsibility for the current catastrophe. Often this occurs at the most personal level.

Partisanship and rigid politics have numbed our minds, with many trying to absolve or blame this or that actor or factor in an absolute manner.

It is difficult to apportion blame accurately, but it is not an intractable puzzle, so long as we consider history and common sense. On the one hand, and at the most basic level, how could one absolve the regime? It was not Jabhat al-Nusra or Qatar that ruled Syria with an iron fist the past four decades. It is one thing to hold external actors responsible for playing a fundamental role in weakening the opposition by hijacking it and

encouraging militant elements in the push to overthrow the regime. It is another thing to cling to this narrative as cover for the regime's decades of repression, its damaging neoliberal economic policies, and other ills. The killing and destruction we are witnessing today in Aleppo and elsewhere is being perpetrated by all sides, but overwhelmingly by the Syrian regime. This destruction is not a break with, but rather a manifestation of, the essential tenets of its rule under different circumstances.

The regime in Syria would react in the same manner to any threat to its rule. It is not as though Assad would have tolerated a locally grown and independent, secular, anti-imperialist, pro-Palestine, leftist opposition, militant or not. The only difference today is the identity and character of the forces behind the opposition. It is this difference that gives the conflict a geopolitical dimension, from which the regime is poised to benefit by deftly identifying and manipulating the opposition's multi-layered contradictions.

In sum, the least complicated claim regarding the Syrian situation, and the one least likely to be countered convincingly, is that of the regime's criminality. Counterclaims do not hold analytical water and do not stand up to factual analysis, let alone moral standing. Those who point to the rebels' killing of tens

of thousands of Syrian Army soldiers and scores of civilians on the regime’s “side,” or those living under its control, are not inaccurate. Yet they do not impinge on the regime’s primary responsibility for the catastrophe, then and now. When the regime’s brutality is invoked, defenders of the “conspiracy” narrative often acknowledge this fact—and then quickly dismiss it in favor of citing (or blaming) bigger culprits as though one cancels the other for those who suffer.

The government—with much help from its regional and international allies—has brutalized the Syrian population since 2011. This fact, however, does not absolve its regional and international opponents from responsibility for significantly contributing to the mayhem. A legitimate protest movement by most Syrians was tangled up with the most cynical and imperial external motives—ones that have nothing to do with bolstering an independent, broad-based, and democratic opposition. No serious reflection can proceed without acknowledging this fact. Many honest observers will admit this much but refrain from drawing out its implications—including the fact that it mars their notion of “opposition” and “revolution.” Many are also unwilling to acknowledge the near impossibility of neatly disentangling the presumably good rebels from the bad ones, and the connection of either or both to unsavory external actors who fueled

the violence that has brutalized the Syrian population. Jabhat al-Nusra, now called Fateh al-Sham, becomes a spigot variable, turned on or off depending on the context. According to the “revolution” narrative, all such talk is fodder for the regime to justify its killing. While this is often true, it whitewashes the “opposition” and/or “rebels” and naively absolves the external actors that support them, all with a horrendous foreign or domestic policy record in the region.

Debunking the excessive claims of external conspiracy does not mean there was no consensus of sorts among regional and international players (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the United States). That consensus centered around the notion that Syria and its allies needed to be cut down to size because they impede domination of the region by those players along with their allies, notably Israel. (Syria and Iraq were the only remaining regional powers that posed any potential threat to Israel’s military occupation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, even if only indirectly, through Hezbollah, in the case of Syria.) These very powers almost tripped over themselves as they rushed to fuel *and* hijack the Syrian uprising for their own purposes. They soon found that there were serious roadblocks— notably, Iran, Russia, and even China. How, then, can

we absolve regional and international actors who have involved themselves in Syrian affairs in the most fundamental ways?

Furthermore, there is an instructive history that fuels cynicism vis-à-vis the external supporters of the “pure and consistent revolution” narrative. What do we make of the decades-long support the Syrian regime received from some of the same oil-rich Arab countries that have bankrolled the militarization of the uprising? Or the extensive cooperative economic plans drawn up between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Syria’s Assad on the eve of the uprising, as though it was a match made in heaven? And what to make of the early US interest in supporting the Syrian opposition, when Washington supported crushing its equivalent in Bahrain only months before, all the while overseeing the mayhem unleashed next door in Iraq with its brutal and fraudulent 2003 invasion?

Any serious observer recognizes that years of turmoil in Iraq, and its porous borders with Syria, had an impact on the nurturing and development of the most militant elements in the Syrian uprising—with notable support from the Syrian regime itself in facilitating the networking and passage of jihadists into Iraq in the post-2003 period. This unsavory history continues in Yemen today, as those calling for humanitarian aid in

Aleppo and an end to Russian and Syrian-regime bombing—Saudi Arabia and the United States—are, respectively, leading and supporting the bombing of rebel-held areas of Yemen, resulting in horrific war crimes.

None of this justifies the slaughter we are witnessing in Aleppo today, but all of it casts doubt on the support for the leading jihadists of the military opposition during the past five years. The regime is now in far better military standing because of stepped-up support from Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi militias. But when it was not, in 2012-14, the “pure revolution” narrative persisted, even as the opposition forces were overrun by jihadists supported by “friends” of the revolution.

We—all of us—need to rethink what we really want. If the argument is simply, all for the sake of revolution, or all for the sake of toppling the regime, then we should redefine what revolution, or regime overthrow, really means for all Syrians, including those who consider the regime the lesser evil. The fact that no one can answer this question is why a multitude of honest regime opponents can still fundamentally differ in diagnosing the conflict.

Productive debates within and outside Syria occur not between die-hard supporters of a repressive regime and supporters of a fractured opposition. Rather, serious debates occur between those who fundamentally and unequivocally oppose the regime, but from different perspectives that pivot around the complicity/subordination of significant portions of the opposition to external actors. In these debates, what that development means regarding the notion of “revolution” and the geopolitical significance of the Syrian conflict is as important as the fact that the uprising began as a genuine uprising against dictatorship. There simply is no rhetorical, let alone practical, escape from dealing seriously with this impasse.

A REGIONAL CATASTROPHE

News coming out of Syria, Russia, Britain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq, and elsewhere indicate that we’re nowhere near a solution to the conflict. Humanitarian instincts that push for stopping the bloodshed frequently lead to calls—ever more insistent, during the siege of east Aleppo—for policies that would seem to guarantee escalation by the Western powers.

In an echo of the narrative binary trap, both the United States and Russia are trapped. Washington will not just sit aside for long and watch Moscow rule the conflict.

But the most frequently suggested US alternative—imposition of a no-fly zone or a no-bombing zone—would have to be accompanied by readiness for direct confrontation with Russia, an almost necessary consequence of any seriously enforced no-fly zone. On the other hand, Russia is now knee-deep in the conflict, with a professed objective to eradicate “terrorist” groups (as it calls all military opposition to the regime). This is an indefinite task, and ultimately a disingenuous cover for much broader goals of global self-assertion, from which Russian President Vladimir Putin will not easily retreat. Half-baked proposals today are at best a band-aid and at worst recipes for full-scale regional or international war. The United States may scale up its involvement, but it is unlikely to overplay its hand in the face of Russian steadfastness, despite Hillary Clinton’s calls for a no-fly zone.

Syria alone is not an important enough player or prize in international relations. For their part, the Syrian regime and Russia are accelerating their conquests to enhance the regime’s position, militarily as well as economically, before a new administration assumes power in Washington next January. But there is another dimension.

To fully understand the reason for this impasse, we must adopt a bird's-eye view of the interconnected regional conflicts. The Syrian war is increasingly bound up with regional developments from Iraq to Yemen, as well as the question of ISIS. Even as Russia pummels Aleppo, Saudi Arabia is pummeling Yemen, using US-made jetfighters that Washington is currently refueling, with Iran advancing its warships to the Yemeni coast in defense of Yemen's Houthi rebels. Russia, Syria, the Syrian rebels, the United States, Turkey, various Kurdish forces, Iraq, and Iraqi popular mobilization forces are all battling or claim to be battling ISIS. The last five of those players have begun their offensive to retake Mosul from ISIS, though the Turks and the Iraqi government are having a war of words about who will be joining that fight. More complications could be added, even if we discount the future.

Anyone who thinks the Syrian conflict can be addressed in isolation from these other battles is not paying attention. Timetables for various actors differ, and though the crushing of the rebels in Aleppo might be a milestone for the Syrian regime and the Russians, it would be but a stage in a broader strategic effort, with ripple effects across the region. With all these moving parts, unforeseen developments are likely to complicate the situation in Syria even further, most of them at the expense of Syrians.

UNSATISFYING EXITS

For some time now, this conflict has been bereft of principles, and notions of victory and victors have become senseless. So far, there are only victims. It is very difficult to write and think calmly while the country is being destroyed and Syrian society is coming apart. But that should propel us into areas we have not considered before.

Considering the militant contenders involved, there actually *should not be* any absolute victors in this conflict. But many do see a potential victor to support. Some want the regime to disappear first, regardless of who is spearheading that effort; they say “only then can we start the talking, building, and reconciliation.” It is as though the regime is an autonomous object, disconnected from people, that can be surgically excised. No less illusory is the demand that the opposition be crushed first, after which the regime will somehow reconstitute its rule over the whole of Syria, bring together whatever is left, and shed its repressive past. Morality aside, both demands are impossible.

The basics are not a puzzle. There can be no return to the pre-2011 rule of Syria—whether or not Russia or the almighty wills it. Similarly, the opposition will not overthrow the regime and build a secular, democratic, and socially equitable Syria, because neither its external

supporters nor its strongest internal militants desire it. Those who do actually desire a secular, democratic, and egalitarian Syrian society exist on both sides of the divide, but their voices are drowned out.

Although current conditions are grim, we can at least envision scenarios that would bring disparate voices together under the banner of struggling for a better Syria. But this can occur only if those involved agree that they cannot win in absolute terms, or at least that they need to redefine victory along lines that are not mutually exclusive, that include all Syrian groups, and that preserve the well-being of most Syrians, even as they hold out the promise of justice for those who have suffered.

Those opposed to the regime, from any perspective, must devote their energies toward building a more independent, democratic, and inclusive movement based on shared national goals and overlapping interests in at least stopping the mayhem. This will be a long and arduous task, one in which we have to take seriously some of the claims and concerns of the narratives this essay has examined. Most importantly, such an effort should not have its sights set on a particular end game; rather, we would do well to keep in mind that there will be life after the conflict, which requires the most responsible kind of building. We must

start now, lest other, more powerful, and well-funded actors steal the day yet again and impose only a softer version of a repressive and exploitative Syria.

The good news is that various groups and organizations in and around Syria have already begun such efforts, and they are well aware that international institutions, funders, and countries will descend on the Syrian scene when it is time to rebuild. These external, well-heeled actors—whether it is the World Bank, the Gulf Cooperation Council, their sponsors, or others, including China—have started their work in anticipation of an eventual end to the conflict, and they have a structural edge in terms of capital and networks. They should not be left alone to rule the “day after.” The alternative efforts deserve our support in pushing for both an independent narrative and a steadfastly independent Syria.

This might seem far-fetched, but it is a vision from which we can create productive ideas that don’t cancel each other out for the sake of existing visions—ones that are even more far-fetched, and considerably more violent.

Bassam Haddad Bassam Haddad is director of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Program and associate professor at the Schar School for Policy and Government at George Mason University. A co-

editor/founder of the e-zine Jadaliyya, he is the author of Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience (2011) and executive director of the Arab Studies Institute.

To submit a correction for our consideration, click [here](#).
For Reprints and Permissions, click [here](#).

.....- COMMENTS (3)

Leave a Comment

TRENDING TODAY

Ads by Revcontent

How to Pay off Your House ASAP (So Simple It's Unbelievable)

Lowermybills

Rachel Maddow's House is Just Plain Disgusting

Routinejournal

Refinance Your Car Loan and Save Thousands

Rate Genius

Hillsborough, New Jersey: This Unbelievable Company is Disrupting a \$200 Billion Industry

EverQuote

**This is the Real Reason
'Bewitched' Was Cancelled!**

Routinejournal

**Actual Wild West Photos
That Are Not Suitable for
History Books**

Routinejournal

**Tomi Lahrens' Net Worth
Left Viewers Outraged!**

90skidsonly

**Remember Him from Two
and a Half Men? Try Not to
Gasp when You See Him Now**

Play Junkie