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After four years of Syria's war, no end in sight

Syria's rebellion has been derailed by ISIL, waning Western support, but rebels say they haven't lost fight

by Michael Pizzi

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Four years ago this week, Raed Fares was one of the tens of thousands of Syrians who took to the streets during the first “days of rage” against 40 years of authoritarian rule by the Assad family. The peaceful protests demanded democratic reform, but the regime cracked down violently. Many anti-regime activists responded by taking up arms, and full-scale war soon erupted. Fares, 42, now runs Radio Fresh, Syria’s first independent station, broadcasting news of the uprising — along with localized warnings about sniper fire and air strikes — for 19 hours a day from the rebel-held town of Kafranbel, northwestern Syria. In an interview with Al Jazeera from the station’s offices, which rely on generators since electricity has been cut off for years, he calls Radio Fresh the “most beautiful and important thing” he ever did.

After the deaths of more than 220,000 people, the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remains unmoved, and the struggle for control of Syria has devolved into a multi-faceted war with no clear endgame in sight. But Fares bristles at the idea that the disjointed rebels will never be able to move past a stalemate with Assad. He insists that the revolution he helped launch in 2011 remains “on track.”



Fares, who was struck by two bullets in January of last year and nearly died, has the means to leave Syria; he's done so twice. But rather than becoming yet another refugee from a conflict that has already displaced 13 million people, he says he will stay until the regime is gone. "Assad will never be a part of the solution in Syria," he said. "We are all going to die before that happens."

The situation facing Fares and other rebel leaders in Syria is unrelentingly bleak. They are fighting over a country that has been largely destroyed. Once great cities like Homs and Aleppo lay in ruins, businesses have closed up shop and most infrastructure has been demolished. The delivery of humanitarian aid is impossible to many areas, leading to mass starvation and outbreaks of previously eradicated diseases, such as polio. Meanwhile, infighting among the rebel groups has left a power vacuum in rebel-held areas that has been filled by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, which now controls more than 30 percent of the country. The group's rise has consumed the attentions of the rebel's Western allies, who, analysts say, have all but abandoned regime change in Syria out of fears that it would give ISIL an opening to expand.

But having sacrificed everything to unseat Assad, the armed rebel factions, political opposition and activists in Syria are not willing to give up. "There's no going back," said Susan Ahmed, who spent most of the last four years as a spokeswoman for the Revolutionary Command in the rebel-held Damascus suburbs. A former university tutor, Ahmed uses a nom de guerre, as a prominent voice of the rebellion against Assad. "I lost so many family members, my house, almost everything in my life," she said. "I can't see a point that I could possibly lose more."

The biggest challenge for the rebels is an enemy that is equally entrenched in this four-year-long war of attrition. In a recent interview with a Russian news organization, a top adviser to Assad insisted that the regime's top priority is "stopping this terrorism destroying the life of the Syrian people."

The regime has only accelerated its use of internationally prohibited barrel bombs and other brutal weaponry against rebel fighters and civilians alike, according to human rights groups. And so far, Assad's key allies have been steadfast. Russia's support on the security council has been crucial, recently blocking a referral of Assad to the International Criminal Court for war crimes, while Iran has been a steady source of both funds and fighters, sending Iranian — along with Lebanese Shia Hezbollah — militias against the Syrian rebels, who are mostly Sunni.

The international community has all but abandoned the idea of peace talks after several summits in Geneva — involving rebel factions, the regime and both sides' foreign benefactors — ended in failure last year. The leading Western-backed opposition faction, the Syrian National Coalition, insisted on Assad's departure as a precondition to any talks; Assad, of course, dismissed that notion out of hand.

The United Nations' current envoy to Syria, Steffan de Mistura, has instead focused his efforts on the more modest aim to establish a "freeze zone," a single cease-fire in Aleppo that might serve as a confidence-building measure for future negotiations. Aleppo has been the scene of near constant fighting over the last four years, and a cease-fire might give the nearly two million people left living there some respite. The regime has tentatively agreed to halt airstrikes for a six-week trial, but its record of using cease-fires to redeploy forces on other fronts makes the rebels hesitant.

"The fighting has always see-sawed back and forth," added Aron Lund, editor of the Carnegie Endowment's Syria in Crisis blog and the author of a book on Syria's opposition. "One side feels too weak to negotiate, while the other feels so strong that it doesn't need to negotiate."

Anti-Assad activists and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) — an umbrella group that the West considers the "moderate" rebels — continue to push for stronger U.S. military support. The Obama administration plans to train 5,000 soldiers from the FSA over the next year as part of a \$500 million program to create a force that can fight both Assad and ISIL.

Few analysts believe the plan is viable. The FSA is currently the weakest faction on the ground in Syria, and has not shown a willingness to prioritize the fight against ISIL — Washington's priority in Syria — over that against the regime, which is what their war has always been about. Many, including former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford, have argued that the U.S. strategy is too little and too late and that it only prolongs the chaos that has allowed ISIL to metastasize. Writing in Foreign Policy this week, Ford reiterated his call for Obama to not only massively increase aid but to also dramatically reorganize Syria's fragmented armed rebels — including factions the U.S. does not consider "moderate" — under a unified command structure.

Many FSA fighters have been calling for a similar reorganization. "The main reason [the FSA is struggling] is that aid is going to corrupt, undeserving leadership," said Abdelnasr Farzat, a former top FSA commander in Aleppo who now lives in Turkey. "There are a lot of honorable fighters able to achieve victory if they were provided the international vision and the necessary, quality weapons and organization for military action."

There is some hope that new variables could change the equation in Syria. Plummeting oil prices have put economic pressure on Iran and Russia, which could strain their costly support for

Assad. The regime, meanwhile, has had to cut subsidies and raise taxes, which could build internal pressure from its war-weary supporters. There are reportedly even rumblings among Assad's ruling Alawite minority, which comprises the bulk of Syria's armed forces and therefore its estimated 75,000 dead.

"The economy in regime-controlled Syria is on life support," said Christopher Phillips, in a recent analysis for the Chatham House think tank. "Even a victory, whatever that now means, will leave a hollowed-out entity facing existential economic, security and social problems."

Absent a sudden surge in Western support for the rebels, however, many analysts feel Syria is heading toward a situation where Assad retains control of most of the important population centers, from Damascus in the south to Lattakia along the Mediterranean coast, while various armed groups, including ISIL, fight over the rest. In effect, Assad could turn into Syria's "strongest warlord," Lund said. "I think the idea is that Syria will not be a united country for a very long time to come, if ever."

That outcome is not what the 2011 revolutionaries had in mind. Ahmed, the former Revolutionary Command spokeswoman, said her side is trying to convince the world that the uprising against Assad is everyone's war. ISIL, she noted, has ambitions of expanding beyond its current territory in Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, millions of refugees are burdening Syria's neighbors, who fear their guests will become a permanent and destabilizing presence unless the war ends. "Syrians feel the world has abandoned them," Ahmed said. "But maybe when you have nothing less to lose you become more determined to fight to the end."