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War without end: Syrian slaughter continues as US and Russia contend

By Salman Rafi

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The Middle East is increasingly morphing into a region where the US and Russia are reliving Cold War-era geopolitical battles.

When Russia began its military campaign in Syria against the Islamists, it was hoped that they would help bring a quick end to the conflict. However, this has proved more hope than reality. This is due not only to the complex nature of the on-going war in Syria, but also because of the mutually conflicting positions of the US and Russia and the “support” the US continues to provide so-called “liberation” and “democratic” forces inside Syria.

While Russia has been quite explicit about its aims in targeting all terrorist forces, regardless of their “moderate” or “un-moderate” positions, the US has been equally explicit in criticizing the damage Russia’s military campaign is inflicting on the so-called “moderates.”

Until a few days ago, President Obama had confined himself to only verbally criticizing the Russian military engagement in Syria. However, his words recently shifted to concrete action in the form of a US airdrop of 50 tons of arms and ammunition to “moderate” forces in Syria.

This was no coincidence. It reflects the policy a number of senior US officials have supported in both the recent and distant past of supplying weapons to such forces. As a matter of fact, former

General David Petraeus said in testimony before the US Congress that he supports sending arms even to such notorious Islamist forces as the Al-Nusra Front, which is also known by the name of Al-Qaeda in Syria.

So-called New Syrian Forces have already indirectly supplied US weapons to al-Qaeda groups in Syria. Though US officials downplayed such incidents as a “distraction,” calling it a violation of their “train and equip” program guidelines, their actions have been inept and shows that they are out of touch when it comes to dealing with anti-Assad forces in Syria.

The recently dropped US weapons were said to have been collected by a newly formed group called the “Syrian-Arab Coalition.” The irony is that this conglomeration of fighters has no clear political pedigree.

What US officials continue to project as a “civil war” with fighters who are viewed as “representatives” of Syria’s “democratic forces” are typical foreign-funded militias that are bent upon overthrowing Syria’s incumbent elected government. Though they’re being guided by the US “train and equip” program, the true nature of these fighters stand as a stark contrast to the US official rhetoric about the war in general and Russian engagement in Syria.

According to some reports, most of these fighters are not even Syrian nationals. They have been channeled into Syria via the Turkish and Jordanian borders by outside interests. Even Malaysians have been arrested, carrying the US-supplied weapons inside Syrian territory. According to some Malaysian officials, about 100 Malaysian nationals are currently fighting against Assad’s forces in Syria.

The US’ notorious \$500 million train and equip program and an overwhelming presence of foreign-funded fighters in Syria are enough to debunk the myth of a real “civil” war in Syria. The simple fact is that this is a war that’s been imposed on Syria. It has virtually no popular basis. This is evident from the fact that according to the UN, nearly 80% of the Syrian population is living in territory currently held by the Syrian government. What else could one demand as a “proof” of Assad’s legitimacy?

One might argue that people flee from territories under Islamist forces’ control to avoid persecution but then fall a prey to the Syrian Army. They may face persecution in the form of Syrian Army investigations of their whereabouts and political affiliations. Notwithstanding this argument, the fact that people seem to willingly live and prefer the territory under the Syrian Army’s control provides equally strong evidence and a counter-narrative to the western-sponsored myth of popular “civil” war.

Why Syrian people are fleeing from the territories under the control of Islamists is evident from a recently published report by Amnesty International, which claimed that fighters from militias have not only been forcing people out of their homes, but also burning them and sometimes razing whole villages.

The Syrian government, which was re-elected in 2014, in the country’s first democratic election, thus becomes a “beacon” of hope for the people suffering at the hands of the Islamists. Speaking

at the UN, human rights activist Judy Bello described the Syrian vote she witnessed saying: *“Observing the popular support for the Syrian election was a moving experience. The people voted from their hearts. Here in the West ... little more than 50% of the population votes. The overwhelming response of the people inside and outside of Syria sent a powerful message to the world of loyalty to their country and to the government that is currently safeguarding it.”*

It's in this context that the underlying logic of the US' policy of arming “friendly forces” is not only highly controversial but flatly fails to convince that the war is really “civil.” It's ironic that while US officials rejoiced over the successful supply of weapons to “Syrian Arab Coalition,” it was only two weeks ago when the US government even began to even refer to the existence of such a coalition. It is also a coalition that Arab fighters in Syria say they have never heard of in the past.

This “ghost group” and supplying of weapons to them reinforces the mutually conflicting positions of the US and Russia in the region. US officials continue to insist that the leaders of the Arab groups inside the this so-called coalition have been “vetted by the US.” This is even though the military brigades that make it up are unknown to the the US and its allies.

The fact of the matter is that the US has been forced to create such “ghost” groups because of the political complications that have arisen in the region since the beginning of Russian offensive against Islamist forces.

On the one hand, Russia has been relatively successful in squeezing the territory under their control. On the other hand, Russia has also been making sustained efforts to neutralize Saudi Arabia and Turkey's involvement in the conflict adding to political tensions. Ironically, the US' double-edged policy vis-à-vis Kurds has been partially responsible for creating tension between Turkey and the US on the one hand, and between the US and Kurds on the other.

The myth of the US' “ghost” Syrian Arab Coalition was effectively imploded by Evan Barrett. Barrett happens to be an adviser to the Coalition for a Democratic Syria, an umbrella group resisting Assad's regime. He said that the US government was deliberately exaggerating the role as well as the importance of the Arab Coalition for three reasons: (1) To prove the US still has a Sunni Arab partner against the Islamic State, (2) To avoid angering the Turks, and (3) To distance the US from the human rights accusations against its Kurdish allies. The Syrian Arab Coalition and the new Syrian Democratic Force are helpful for all three goals, he said, adding that “both groups seem to have been invented from whole cloth over the last several days.”

In conclusion, the current episode in the Mideast can be explained simply: the US has been forced into a corner where it might lose due to the loss of military advantage in the region because of Russia's intervention. The diplomatic position of the US is similarly threatened. There are hopes on the US side that American-trained “moderate terrorists” might succeed in forming an army that President Obama claimed would defeat ISIS. The US also hopes that these groups, after becoming credible players, will take their place at the table and move on against Damascus and Assad on behalf of the US.

Although Obama keeps rejecting the idea that the Syrian war is becoming or will, at some point, become a “proxy war” between the US and Russia, current US policy points to exactly such a result. Moreover, if the US continues to “protect” its trained and equipped fighters, as Pentagon officials keep urging, the war will not only drag on for years, it will also add to the already 250,000 dead and more than 2 million displaced people of Syria.