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Do the Tragedies of Syria Signal the End of Arab Revolutions?

By Robert Fisk
December 26, 2016

Just as the catastrophic Anglo-American invasion of Iraq brought an end to epic Western military adventures in the Middle East, so the tragedy of Syria ensures that there will be no more Arab revolutions. And it's taken just 13 bloodsoaked years – from 2003 to 2016 – to realign political power. Russia and Iran and the Shia Muslims of the region are now deciding its future; Bashar al-Assad cannot claim victory – but he is winning.

“Aleppo must be taken quickly – before Mosul falls,” a Syrian brigadier announced to me with a wan smile in the country's army headquarters in Damascus. And it did, scarcely a month later. There were – and still are – little Aleppos all over Syria in which the government and its armed “jihadi” opponents are playing “good guy” and “bad guy”, depending on who is besieging whom. When the Sunni militias end their siege of little Shia towns like Faour, the civilians flock to government lines. It's reported as a slightly incomprehensible local dispute.

But when the regime's forces storm into eastern Aleppo, it's deplored around the world as a war crime. I've grown tired of repeating that, yes, war crimes are committed on both sides, and Bashar's forces are no squeaky clean military cadets – although these days, we have to remember that 42 Royal Marine Commandos were not that squeaky clean in Afghanistan. But the story of Aleppo is still being re-threaded into old loops, the brave but largely “jihadi” defenders disguised as nondescript “rebels”, their opponents compared to Milosevic's Serb killers or Saddam's gas-bomb pilots.

All this will soon end. Russia realised that Obama and the weeping liberals of Europe were bluffing about the overthrow of Bashar – who, unlike Putin’s Ukrainian ally in Kiev, did not run away – and backed his army. The Economist made fun of Syrian soldiers because they supposedly couldn’t march in step when Moscow staged a military parade at its Syrian air base. But you don’t have to march like the Wehrmacht to win battles. The Syrian Arab Army – its real name, which is increasingly used, I notice, by the usual mountebanks who pose as “experts” on the satellite channels – boasts that it has fought simultaneously on 80 fronts against Isis, Nusra and a clutch of other “jihadi” armies (and Free Syrian Army men who changed sides). Which, given the infractions and bulges in front lines, is probably true, but perhaps not a military record to be proud of. It’s one thing to recapture Palmyra from Isis, quite another to lose it to Isis again in the middle of the battle for eastern Aleppo.

Syrian soldiers have a lot of time for their Hezbollah militia allies – who used to turn up on the battlefield better armed than the Syrians themselves – but are less enamoured of the Iranian “advisors” who supposedly know so much about open warfare. I have been present when an Iranian officer called a Syrian general “stupid” – in this case, the Iranian was probably right – but Syrian officers are far more battle-trained and experienced than the Revolutionary Guard from Tehran who have sustained – along with their Afghan and Iraqi Shia allies – far more casualties than they believed possible.

So after almost five years of battle, the Syrian army is still in action. The Nusra and Isis forces surrounding the government sector of the eastern Syrian city of Deir ez-Zour will almost certainly be its next target — after the retaking of Palmyra, but long before the Isis capital of Raqqa, which will probably be retaken by Washington’s Kurdish allies. And it is the Syrian army which will most likely have to rebuild the new Syria when the war eventually ends. It will certainly decide the future of the country.

That doesn’t mean the overthrow of Bashar. Neither among his official opponents nor his mortal jihadi enemies nor the corrupt and corrupted political opposition in Turkey is there anyone who can challenge him on the ground. Even if they were successful, you can be sure that the same prisons and dungeons in Syria would be in operation within 24 hours to lock up and torture the “new” opposition to a “new” regime. Besides, Vladimir Putin has suffered enough humiliation after Isis’s second success in Palmyra – after the Russians staged a victory concert of peace in the Roman city only a few months ago. He is not going to permit the defenestration of Bashar al-Assad.

Oddly, Western leaders remain stupefyingly unaware of the nature of the real struggle in Syria, and even which warlords they should support. Take the impotent François Hollande, who chose to tell the United Nations in September that Russia and Iran must compel Assad to make peace, because they would otherwise, along with the regime, “bear the responsibility for the division and chaos in Syria”. All well and good. Yet only two months earlier, the same Hollande was demanding “effective action” against the Islamist Nusra front – among the defenders of Aleppo, although most of us decided not to tell our readers this – on the grounds that Isis was in retreat

and Nusrah stood to take advantage of this. “That is beyond dispute,” Hollande pompously remarked of Isis’s “retreat”. That was before the retaking of Palmyra by the same ISIS brigands.

But perhaps Hollande and his European allies – and Washington – are so besotted with their own weak and flawed policies towards Syria (always supposing they can decide what these are), that they do not realise how power moves across battlefields. Instead of whinnying on about Russian brutality and mixing this in with Iranian cruelty and Hezbollah mendacity, they should be taking a close look at the mostly Sunni Muslim Syrian army which has been fighting, from the very start, against its mostly Sunni Muslim “jihadi” enemies. They have always regarded Nusrah – our “allies” in eastern Aleppo, since they are paid by our Gulf chums and armed by us — to be more dangerous than Isis. The Syrian army are right. Here, at least, Hollande must surely agree with their conclusion.

Yet the power of illusion matters more to us. If the West can’t retake Mosul from Isis, they could hardly have stopped the Syrians retaking eastern Aleppo. But they could easily encourage the Western media to concentrate on the beastly Russians in Aleppo rather than the fearful casualties inflicted on America’s allies in Mosul. The reporting on Aleppo these past weeks has sounded much like the accounts of British war correspondents in the First World War. And the Russians could encourage their own tame media to concentrate on the victory at Aleppo rather than defeat at Palmyra. As for Mosul, it’s mysteriously vanished from our news. I wonder why?

And how many died in Palmyra? And, for that matter, how many were really captive in eastern Aleppo? Was it really 250,000? Or was it 100,000? I came across a news report a few weeks ago which gave two overall statistics for fatalities in the entire Syrian war: 400,000; then, a few paragraphs later, 500,000. Well, which is it? I’m always reminded of the Nazi bombing of Rotterdam in 1940 when the Allies announced that 30,000 civilians had been killed. For years, this was the authentic figure. Then after the war, it turned out that the real figure – though terrible enough — was only around 900, 33 times less than the official version. Makes you wonder, doesn’t it, what Syria’s statistics really are?

And if we can’t get those right, what are we doing interfering in the Syrian war? Not that it matters. Russia is back in the Middle East. Iran is securing its political semi-circle of Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut. And if the Gulf Arabs – or the Americans – want to reinvolve themselves, they can chat to Putin. Or to Assad.