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Syria's Survival

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I'm talking about Syria here. Knowing that I write this at my peril, I continue. Not as a defense, but as an argument, one from a different and, I believe, a worthy perspective. Because some acknowledgement must be made— especially by those who are aware of the terrible might of US power and Washington's determination to destroy Syria at any cost—of that small, ancient nation's astonishing ability to resist. Just as those who applaud Palestinians' resolute pursuit of statehood; just as those who now regard Viet Nam with admiration for its emergence as a self-reliant, noble nation.

Syria's current struggle against multiple assaults is not over by any means. It remains in a highly vulnerable state. Its people are scattered across the globe, its highly educated citizens lost to other nations ready to exploit their skills. Refugees in camps and those suffering at home are uncertain of anything at all. Syria's military has lost tens of thousands of mortally wounded men. (And what about the injured?) Its youths flee conscription. Syria's once strong economy is crippled and barely recognizable. Its social institutions are overwhelmed, and its cultural riches, including contemporary theater and television, are shrunken or destroyed.

Yet, more than six years into a war that's caused such hardship and destruction, after so many attacks against it, Syria stands. Its leader, an inexperienced and fallible man but no tyrant, has thus far withstood Washington's scurrilous pursuit of his removal. American-led military and

diplomatic efforts to overthrow his government have failed, even with the Arab League's shameless ejection of this founding member.

Not only is Syria still intact, albeit terribly crippled on so many levels. It has managed to sustain alliances with its few supporting powers—from Iran to China. Its military gains (regains really) in the past two years are astonishing by any standard, however high the cost and however unlikely it seemed, considering the formidable opposition it faced. (Compare this with US military impotence in Afghanistan.)

Assaults are directed at Syria by US-supported Arab forces, by ISIS and Al-Qaeda militants, by local insurgents, by Arab Gulf States lined up with the West and Israel, by Turkey on its northern border and by Israel and Jordan along its southern frontier, with Israeli and US fighter jets bombing at will. (One strike by US bombers killed dozens and maimed another hundred Syrian soldiers.) What an opposition lined up against a nation of under 30 million people! All this without Syrian (or Russian) retaliation against either Israel or the USA.

Unquestionably Syria's military achievements have been possible with Russian air support. Russia's diplomatic assistance has also been critical: first in arranging for the removal of chemical threats, and before that in preventing the UN Security Council backing an American anti-regime agenda.

Early in the crisis in 2011, living in Damascus, I spoke with a longtime colleague, an experienced bureaucrat but no longer a government official. I was struck by his confidence in the Russia-China veto just declared in the UN Security Council. (Both countries rejected the US-led attempt to censure and sanction Syria.) Six months on, when we met again, there was widespread belief among foreigners and some expectation within Syria too that Al-Assad's government would soon collapse. My colleague however was emphatic in his assessment of the Russia-China veto: "Russia will stay with us", he declared confidently. I guess government insiders and military leaders shared this judgment. But who could have anticipated how many months of war would follow before the tide began to turn?

In early 2016, Syria (and Russia) achieved the first of a series of impossible victories against its ISIS foes. Meanwhile the western press (despondently) described successfully recovered territory as "falling into government hands". Even from afar, with no inside track about military strategies, one could sense that those victories exhibited a resolve of a special order, akin perhaps to the victories of Cuba and of Venezuela under Chavez—also targets of US imperial power.

Some American allies who had once endorsed the removal of the Syrian president now appear to be backing away from that position. Opponents have never been able to convincingly prove that Syria deployed chemical weapons, more so after research findings by MIT chemical weapons expert Theodore Postol, and following journalist Seymour Hersh's investigations on the subject. (Hersh's report has been ignored by the US media.) Wikileaks' release of US state department exchanges on Syria that point to plans by the US to overthrow the Syrian government have also undermined Washington's arguments.

As for “the people”, this month witnessed some easing of their hardships. Although US air strikes continue, aimed ostensibly at ISIS but taking a heavy civilian toll. A sign of renewed vitality for besieged civilians was the international fair that recently took place in Damascus. It drew hundreds of exhibitors from many nations, and offered rare respite and pleasure to tens of thousands of citizens. That such an international gathering could even be arranged is remarkable. Yet, so threatening was this promise of renewed hope for peace that the site was bombed, resulting in the death of several fairgoers.

During the 1990s and up to the outbreak of conflict, Syria had achieved remarkable progress on a number of fronts— diplomatic, economic, educational, social and cultural. Yet, Washington and its allies, the U.K and Israel, persisted with their agenda. Sanctions against Syria remained and were enhanced, and vilification of its leader and attacks on Baath ideology by a compliant press persisted. In the face of Syria’s survival as a state, if ISIS is crushed, what are the options for an alliance of the US, UK and Israel who would never admit defeat?