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Rebels offer Assad a comeback

By Victor Kotsev

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With Saudi Arabia and Russia both flexing muscles and the US-Iranian dialogue in uncharted waters, the bloody Syrian civil war, which has killed at least 110,000 people to date, is undergoing a new profound transformation. The rebels have turned into their own worst enemies, and though the stalemate continues, for the first time since the start of the uprising Syrian President Bashar al-Assad looks relatively comfortable in his grip on power.

One has to wonder what is left of the Free Syrian Army (by some accounts only a few thousand soldiers) after some of its units recently defected to al-Qaeda and others apparently entered into direct negotiations with the regime. News of the second development was broken by the veteran correspondent Robert Fisk in the Independent late last month, and it seems that even future cooperation between Assad's army and former defectors against the extremists may be in the works. [1]

Nobody yet speaks about Assad winning the war or recovering the territorial integrity of Syria, such as it was two and a half years ago. That would require some very advanced military-diplomatic tricks, such as dealing with the resurgent Kurds and crushing decisively the powerful foreign-backed jihadist juggernaut - the latter a feat that both Cold War superpowers repeatedly failed to accomplish over the last three decades.

But the Syrian president has been on quite a roller-coaster recently and has so far come out of it

as well as he possibly could. It seems surreal that as recently as 2011, an ill-fated Vogue article described Syria as "the safest country in the Middle East." Just over a year later, the country was in ruins and it looked like the regime was imploding under the military pressure of the rebels. It made a comeback, only to come close to the cliff again less than two months ago, when the US threatened to attack over its alleged use of chemical weapons in August.

Right now the possibility of a Western intervention has all but evaporated: US-Iranian negotiations have taken the front seat, and such an adventure would put paid to any possible accord. In the foreseeable future, moreover, deepening Russian involvement in Syria could be a guarantee of sorts for Assad's tenure.

William Polk, a top former US analyst and a member of the Cuban Missile Crisis management team, estimated in a recent analysis that the US-Russian agreement over the Syrian chemical weapons would eventually involve some "5-10 thousand Russians and perhaps twice that number of UN-designated peacekeeping forces from third countries." Polk added, "With a Russian force in residence and forced to protect its widely scattered personnel and a significant UN peacekeeping force interspersed among the Russians, the government can to some degree discount external aggression." [2]

Officially, Moscow is tight-lipped about any such plans, but it is already deeply involved in Syria and even the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization hinted recently that Russia would assist more actively there.

Still, the hard-core international supporters of the rebels, such as Saudi Arabia, are not giving up either. The fight is likely to be long and no less brutal than it has already been. In an interview with Foreign Policy magazine, Syria expert Joshua Landis estimated that the recent decision by the Saudis to reject their seat at the UN Security Council was meant to deflect pressure on them to change their course.

"If the Saudis were to join the UN Security Council they would have to follow the US and Russia's lead," Landis was quoted as saying. "There would be heavy pressure on Saudi Arabia to stop subsidizing Salafist militias in Syria and they don't want to do it. Russia and America would say 'Look, you are part of the United Nations and you have to sever your ties with the Syrian rebels and stop sending them arms and money.' But Saudi Arabia doesn't want to rein them in." [3]

On the ground, the extremist wing of the rebels is still very strong, controlling large swathes of northern Syria and even making periodic advances near Damascus. Jihadists from all over the world are streaming into the country at an unprecedented rate [4] and the death toll on the government side, already believed to be considerably higher than that among the rebels, continues to climb.

But with the decline of the moderate rebels, the opposition may be fast losing the hearts and minds of all but the most committed ordinary Syrians. It doesn't help that in some places people are starving to the point where Islamic clerics are telling them to eat cats and dogs, [5] and their plight is set to get even worse as the weather gets colder.

Indeed, those civilians in the devastated rebel-held areas who survive the coming winter are extremely unlikely to want another one, whatever the stakes. If Assad still doesn't look like he's anywhere near leaving by election time next summer, many of them could even vote for him.

Nothing is set in stone - the Saudis and their allies still have tricks left up their sleeves, and there are more than a few other spoilers out there who will try to torpedo the US-Iranian track. Down the road, the partition of Syria, much like that of the former Yugoslavia, might be the best and the most humane path to stabilizing the country. For the time being, however, the carnage continues without any clear end in sight.

Notes:

1. A Syrian solution to civil conflict? The Free Syrian Army is holding talks with Assad's senior staff, *The Independent*, September 30, 2013.
2. William Polk on Syria: What Now?, *The Atlantic*, September 16, 2013.
3. 'This Is Not How a Protection Racket Is Supposed to Work', *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2013.
4. French intelligence sees steep rise in Western jihadists flocking to Syria, *Washington Times*, October 22, 2013.
5. Syrian clerics plead for help after fatwa on eating dogs and cats, *Al-Arabiya*, October 14, 2013.