

Syria Must Be Settled

by Michael Curtis

In order to form a more perfect understanding of politics in the Middle East and to provide a prescription for American foreign policy concerning the morass in Syria, it is important to appreciate the complexities of the issues raised by the civil war in that country. For the United States, those issues pose the imperatives of limited military action, ideological challenge against Islamist terrorism, and diplomatic initiatives to press for a negotiated settlement of the hostilities.

An uprising, started in March 2011 calling for liberalization of the Syrian regime, was transformed first into a brutal civil war and then into a regional and international conflict, one linked in part to the struggle for hegemony in the Middle East. Most commentators thought that the original uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad would succeed. The Obama administration was mistaken in believing that the Sunni Arab states in the Middle East would ally with it in quickly ending the rule of the brutal Assad.

It's not easy to make sense of the warring factions and the unusual and changing relationships among them. The cast includes Alawites, Sunnis, Shias, Christians, Druze and Kurds. To this national struggle has been added the regional and international actors: Iran, the U.S. and its partners, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Turkey, often acting in a negative and unhelpful manner.

In the bitter struggle in Syria, cruelty and inhumane activity is characteristic of both sides. If Assad is a brutal person whose forces have used barrel, cluster, and vacuum bombs, the rebel groups against him have used artillery using gas cylinders. In July 2016 the continuing battles claimed 5,000

lives. Total casualties since 2011 are estimated about 450,000, while 4.8 million have fled the country and 6.6 million have been displaced.

When the hostilities began, the Alawite Assad regime had about 300,000 fighters, but that number has been substantially reduced, perhaps to little more than 100,000. Among its allies or those fighting on its behalf are Hezbollah, unofficially before 2013 and officially since then. That Lebanese terrorist group lost its head military commander in the fighting. Iran, seeing Assad as a non-Sunni key ally in the region, supplies arms, fuel, and an armed force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. That force is linked with Shia militias recruited from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The surprise in 2015 was the entrance of Russia to support Assad with air strikes, air defense, and a small group of mercenaries organized by a private company named "Wagner" that probably prevented his immediate defeat.

The rebel forces fighting against the Assad regime are of different kinds. At first the most important group appeared to be the supposedly moderate Free Syrian Army, nominally under the Syrian National Coalition that was supported by Arab states, and to a lesser degree by the Obama administration. More influence has been the Islamist forces involved in the fight against Assad. Among them are Fateh Halab and Jaysh al-Fateh, a coalition of Islamists. Alongside these are Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly until July 2016 Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, which, perhaps for tactical not ideological reasons, has renounced its advocacy of international jihad, and Ahrar al-Sham, the hard line group linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The immediate concern is the appalling conditions in the city Aleppo, that since 2012 has been divided between government and rebel forces, both of which see it as central to the outcome of the conflict. The city of Aleppo, once the most populous, economically important, and culturally diverse city

in Syria, remains embroiled in a vicious battle that has gone on for 4 years.

What is important here is the silence of the United Nation and the supposedly humanitarian organizations, usually so critical of Israel for any infraction, while more than a quarter of a million people are interned in the east part of the city, where 2 million are without vital supplies, and where there is an urgent need for water and electricity. It is shameful they have been silent in a tragic situation, one that resembles the siege of Sarajevo that lasted four years, 1992-1996 during the Bosnian War, and the massacre at Srebrenica in 1995.

The Syrian imbroglio, with its national, regional, and international aspects, is not simply a disaster in itself with a power vacuum in what is now the failed state of Syria and also in Iraq. It has also occasioned other problems: the rise of ISIS and Islamist terrorism; the greater role being played by Russia in the area; and the migration problem that now haunts Europe and the US.

In his speech at West Point on May 28, 2014, President Barack Obama repeated his principle that the US will use military force when "our core interests demand it." But when issues of global concern do not pose a direct threat to the US, then, the President said, "the threshold for military action must be higher." The US, then, should not go it alone.

Nevertheless, the US cannot ignore what happens outside of its borders. It should combine a more active military role in Syria with efforts to use all diplomatic means for a settlement which is essential to solve the bitter conflict. This should involve a limited not a full US entry into the war, one that prevents the jihadist rebel forces from gaining ground, and helps reduce the misery and death of innocent civilians, and well as pressuring Assad and the rebels to come to the negotiating table.

Lessons of the recent past must be learned: the US should not press for regime change, a policy that might be counterproductive in prolonging the war. At this point, it is not clear whether the fragmented state of Syria can be consolidated, but the rival parties must be brought together.

Above all, the US must persuade Russia to form a united front in the effort to reach a negotiated settlement. President Vladimir Putin acted decisively, in September 2015, aiding Assad with bombers and missiles, stopping the rebel advance, while increasing its Mediterranean naval base. Obama was incorrect to argue that the Russian intervention would get stuck in a quagmire and that it wouldn't work.

Russia, perhaps compensating for its humiliation in Afghanistan in 1979, is now a significant presence in the Middle East, taking advantage of the indecisiveness of Obama and his reluctance to get seriously involved the Middle East. The next US President has a delicate role to play. That President must limit any further Russian control in the area, while at the same time joining in the essential need to reach a negotiated agreement of the Syrian civil war.