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Spotlight on Geneva while Syria Sinks in the Quicksands

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Summary

That the first round of talks in Geneva in the last week of January achieved nothing as Mr Brahimi admitted, is not a surprise. But is there a strategy? For there to be one, it must connect the political negotiations to action on the ground. A coherent strategy should have been adopted months ago when the dynamics on the ground would have allowed the democratic elements of the armed rebellion to prevent the radicalization of significant part of the rebellion. But Syrian democrats haven't disappeared. Army defectors, first day revolutionaries, and pro-democracy FSA brigades have not only proved to be pragmatic in understanding the need for a political transition to end the crisis but also showed to be surprisingly efficient in fighting extremists groups that the media presented as invincible.

By sub-contracting military and financial support to regional powers and private donors, the West let Salafi beneficiaries of this aid take a prominent role in the Syrian armed rebellion. But military successes of Islamist groups cannot be converted into political gains, simply because a sectarian dictatorship cannot be successfully fought with a sectarian discourse. An effective strategy for Western governments should have (and now still can start by) re-asserted the dual objective of inflicting decisive losses on the regime in the battlefield and ensuring that the winners will rebuild a united Syria for all the components of its society. This requires investing in a propaganda war to counter the regime's fallacies, and empowering carefully vetted groups who have the potential to grow rapidly and to spearhead a movement to correct the balance of forces among groups within the overall rebellion.

The first round of talks in Geneva in the last week of January achieved nothing, Mr Brahimi admitted. The regime can breathe a sigh of relief. Neither Assad nor the Putin administration were likely to be impressed with the media successes of the opposition. It takes a few days only for their impact to disappear and for the embarrassment to evaporate. What matters is what happens on the ground and the ground is sending the most disturbing messages. Are we just in for a new round of gaining time/losing time, depending on which side one sits?

The story of the Syrian revolution is mostly about missed opportunities and about what could have been done that would have changed the dynamics of the conflict but was not done at the right time, thus creating a more difficult situation, reducing the options and increasing the risks for action. Time was always of the essence in the Syrian conflict. Any assessment of the state of forces on the ground is not valid more than six months. Groups that were formed with an explicit nationalist, non-Islamist agenda have lost many of their fighters to groups funded by Islamists. A defected colonel, who prides himself of having assembled nationalist secular fighters from all the communities of Syria within a liberal front only to see it disintegrate after a few months, says half-jokingly: “*six months from now, you might find me with Al Nosra Front; I might have no other choice left; don’t be surprised if it happens*”.

Yet the temptation to fall into fatalism is a big mistake. Yes, a different strategy should have been adopted several months ago when the democratic part of the armed opposition was still able to counterbalance the radical Islamists. The authors previously identified a number of them and described how they took great risks to oppose and sometimes fight Jihadi groups.¹ Some of their leaders are still fighting but many have been assassinated, kidnapped, abandoned the armed struggle or fled abroad. But Syrian democrats haven't disappeared. Defectors, activists, first day revolutionaries, are still there, waiting for their time, forming new coalitions every other month. The latest include the [Syrian Revolutionaries’ Front](#) and the [Mujahdeen Army](#) announced in early December 2013 that brings together leading Free Syrian Army brigades linked to the Supreme Military Council (SMC), prominent tribal leaders and have declared an all out war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). After the [Islamic Front](#) takeover of Idriss’s Supreme Military Council’s headquarters on December 6 2013, analysts portrayed the FSA as definitively out of game. In January, these SMC linked brigades proved to be not only still existing but also surprisingly successful in launching a coordinated attack against ISIS, liberating most of Idlib and Aleppo provinces. These groups will not gain influence outside of their popular local base of support if funding continues to be directed primarily to Salafi groups.

The solution to the conflict is neither in the hands of Assad nor in those of the Salafis. A self-reinforcing and self-defeating process has been at play for much of the last two

¹ Bassma Kodmani, Félix Legrand, *Empowering Democratic Resistance in Syria*, Arab Reform Initiative, September 2013 [<http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/empowering%20the%20democratic%20resistance.pdf>]

years: the military prowess of the Islamists are not yielding the desired political results (e.g. defections within the ranks of the regime, the army, the Alawi community) mostly because these groups are frightening too many Syrians (the minorities, the liberal Sunnis and all the hesitant Syrians sitting on the fence) as well as the West. Thus military successes of Islamist groups cannot be converted into political gains, simply because a sectarian dictatorship cannot be successfully fought with a sectarian discourse.

Less than the sum of its parts

An effective strategy for Western governments should have (and now still can) re-asserted the dual objective of inflicting decisive losses on the regime in the battlefield *and* ensuring that the winners will rebuild a united Syria for all the components of its society. To achieve the former, Islamists have become a necessary part of the strategy and Gulf countries are supporting them with massive aid, choosing the groups that have the right Islamist profile and discourse to appeal to elements from the more radical groups. This is the rationale behind the Saudi support of the [Islamic Front](#) created in November 2013. For the latter objective however, clear criteria need to be applied to identify the fighters who can spearhead a re-balancing process *within* the rebellion: those who have a clearly national discourse, who reflect Syrian ethnic and sectarian diversity, who commit to abide by a political settlement, implement a security plan that will bring back stability law and order, and to work under the control of a central governing political authority. Today, an effective strategy needs to parallel the support provided by the Gulf countries to Islamist groups and invest in carefully vetted groups who have the potential to grow rapidly and to spearhead a movement to correct the balance of forces among groups within the overall rebellion.

Military experts have been perplexed by the absence of a coherent strategy that sets overall objectives to effectively support the rebellion. No vision was ever laid out that includes expert advice on operational and tactical organization, training in basic military skills, building an effective command system, developing capacity in intelligence and a logistics system ranging from food for the fighters to vehicles for transportation or providing money to ensure loyalty. Without a comprehensive strategy targeting clearly identified groups it is obvious that the West cannot provide sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons (nor should it provide any kind of weapons for that matter) to groups who can potentially turn against its interests.

There is for example a dire need for anti-tanks weapons in sufficient quantity to create what military experts call a dense anti-tank environment, allowing for the protection of civilians in towns and villages when they come under attack. Over two full years, elements of the FSA, including experienced military officers have been complaining about the scarcity of such weapons. Even when they conquer positions, they are unable to defend them. As US military expert Jeffrey White put it, without a coherent strategy the Syrian resistance movement will remain less than the sum of its parts.

The increasing use by the regime of heavy artillery, air bombings, Scud missiles, and even surface to air missiles used to strike civilian targets at short distances needs to be confronted with ever increasingly heavy and costly arms for the opposition. This has had two consequences: one, such equipment could only be afforded by government budgets; and two, given the pressure by Western governments, particularly the US to prevent the Gulf countries from delivering advanced weapons, fighters willing to carry out suicide attacks became the alternative. *If you can't deliver advanced weapons just pay Jihadis*, the reasoning goes, and they will break through checkpoints or military bases controlled by the regime. The sad reality is that over the last year, the main advances by the rebellion were achieved through suicide attacks conducted by Jihadis willing to die. Who is to blame for this: the rebels, the Gulf governments who support them, or the countries that sub-contracted the military and financial efforts to the regional powers? Which players were in a position to prevent this from happening and alter the direction of the conflict?

Regime created FSA Brigades

Another crucial failure is the lack of intelligence capability within the rebellion without which it will never be able to protect itself. It is increasingly clear that the regime has worked to systematically infiltrate the Free Syrian Army and several sources indicate that it has created its own brigades within the FSA to then pretend it is fighting them. Assad's strategy is inspired by that of the Algerian *Sécurité Militaire* in the 1990s which is widely believed to have successfully ended the bloody confrontation with the Islamist armed groups of the GIA (*Groupe Islamique Armée*) by infiltrating them and committing atrocities in their name, to the extent that no one could tell anymore whether the massacres were committed by the GIA or the *Sécurité Militaire*. The FSA has no intelligence capability to speak of that would allow it to protect itself from such infiltrations or uncover the fake FSA groups. An effective strategy on the part of the West ought to include training selected groups of Syrians and building their capacity to conduct some of the vital intelligence work they need.

US officials cannot in good faith add their voice to the debate over percentages of Islamist versus secular fighters in Syria as if they were mere observers. They fail to mention why extremists who represented 2% of the rebellion a year ago are now estimated at 20% or more, and the fact that they did nothing to prevent groups who were calling for democracy from shrinking, while the ones swearing allegiance to the laws of Islam were swelling. Everyone knows by now that the colour of the flag raised by the fighters is a function of who has paid for their equipment and vital needs.

Armed propaganda

Syrians may want to study the experience of the ANC's armed struggle: an unwinnable fight on military ground but above all a form of armed propaganda. It is not about how many more checkpoints the Islamic Front will be able to capture or if it will be successful in re-imposing a siege on West Aleppo; rather it is about what strategy to adopt in order to keep Syria together. This strategy should be implemented while working towards a negotiated transition based on ensuring the continuity of the Syrian state and its capacity to restore security. A large part of the Islamist opposition is already supporting the negotiation process. If a political settlement is reached that does not leave any power in the hands of the Assad family, these forces will be faced with the choice to either abide by the political settlement or be confronted with security means by a national unity government.

A coherent Western strategy would also bring into the picture some high ranking defected officers from the different communities of Syria. Some prominent generals are awaiting the right moment to play their role. There is little chance that the regime can be defeated if such figures remain on the margins. The situation seems ripe for this to happen now by lining up such a group of key military figures (Druze, Christians, Kurds, Ismailis, and Alawites in addition to clearly secular Sunnis) to announce together the formation of a national armed command. This would be the most effective way to reassure the hesitant and frightened Syrians and encourage new defections among the military and political circles alike. The head of the Supreme Military Council Salim Idriss has been complaining since he was appointed a year ago that the lack of financial and military support has prevented him from taking control of the groups on the ground. He now finds himself disavowed by actors of the armed rebellion who managed to secure funding through channels independent of the SMC. The financial support is vital, but an additional component is necessary for a strategy to be effective, namely to link Salim Idriss with the defected generals from the various communities and encourage them to assert a clearly national, non-sectarian identity and announce collectively that the future army of Syria has the capacity to bring back law and order and reflect the diversity of the country's social fabric. With such a group, the alternative to Assad who hides behind secularism might start to emerge.

Is the US willing to undertake with European allies such an effort or will they be tempted to embrace Assad, revive cooperation with his *mukhabarat* and convince themselves that stability will be restored in Syria thanks to the same man who created the Jihadi monsters in the first place while Assad controls the dynamics of the conflict and the world watches Syria disappear in the quicksands?