

## **A New Phase in the Struggle for Syria**

*By Patrick Seale*

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While blood-letting in Syria continues on a grand scale, the situation in and around the country is far from static. Three major developments are worth noting, as they are changing the nature of the struggle.

First, the United States and its Western allies are becoming increasingly alarmed at the rise to prominence in Syria of extremist al-Qaeda-backed rebel groups, such as the Nusra Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*), which has eclipsed all its rivals in fighting prowess in the field. Washington has put it on a list of foreign terrorist groups.

Indeed, many are beginning to ask what is the point of the U.S. and its allies waging war against al-Qaeda across the world - in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and, most recently, in Mali - while giving free rein to it in Syria, thereby no doubt guaranteeing it a major role in any post-Asad government. The spectre of a Taliban-type regime on the doorstep of Europe is causing real concern and explains the increasing reluctance of Western countries to arm the rebels.

The current European Union embargo on arms deliveries to Syria is due to expire on 1 March. Will it be renewed or will weapons be allowed to flow in? The British and French foreign ministers, William Hague and Laurent Fabius, have been very much in favour of arming the rebels. But they are likely to meet stiff resistance at the next council meeting of European foreign ministers in Brussels on February 18. The Western mood is now far more cautious in dealing with the Syrian crisis.

A second major development is a growing split in the civilian ranks of the Syrian opposition, a fractious body at the best of times. The Turkey-based Syrian National Council (SNC), dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, has always rejected any negotiation with the Syria regime so long as Bashar al-Asad remains in power. Its prime objective is to topple him. But the SNC has proved to be an ineffective body of squabbling exiles, exercising little control over the fighters in the field. To remedy the situation, Qatar and the United States sponsored the creation last November of a new opposition body -- the Syrian National Coalition -- headed by an apparently moderate Islamist, Moaz al-

Khatib, who had been the Imam of the Great Omayyad Mosque in Damascus. The old SNC was incorporated in the new Coalition as a sort of junior partner.

Al-Khatib's new Coalition, however, has not done much better than its predecessor. Its constituent factions have failed to show enough cohesion to allow it to form a credible opposition 'government' - and thereby win real financial and political backing from the West, not to speak of weapons.

Such is the background to the political bombshells recently dropped by two opposition figures. Haytham al-Manna, a veteran Paris-based Syrian civil rights activist, has from the start of the uprising in 2011 firmly opposed the rebels' resort to arms. When the world's attention was focussed on the fighting, he was ignored. But the military stalemate has contributed to a change of mood, which has allowed al-Manna to re-emerge into public view. On 28 January, he chaired what seems to have been a highly successful meeting of like-minded opposition figures in Geneva. Two days later, on 30 January, Moaz al-Khatib -- perhaps not wishing to be upstaged by al-Manna -- dropped his own bombshell by announcing (on his Facebook page) his willingness 'to take part in direct talks with representatives of the Syrian regime...'

This dramatic statement was seen as a positive response to President Bashar al-Asad call on January 6 for a major conference of national reconciliation tasked with drawing up a charter outlining how Syria was to be governed in future, the terms of which would then be put to a referendum, followed by elections, the formation of a new government and a general amnesty.

Moaz al-Khatib was immediately denounced by opposition hardliners, notably by the Muslim Brothers. He was forced to explain that he had spoken in a purely personal capacity, but it was widely suspected that he was reflecting a growing trend in the opposition which, despairing at the horrendous human and material cost of the conflict, is perhaps almost ready to give dialogue a chance. No doubt, al-Khatib has also grasped that, as there is little hope of Western military and financial aid on the massive scale required, it might be time to explore the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the regime.

Needless to say, Israel is watching these developments with very great attention. Indeed, a third major recent development was Israel's air strike on the night of 29-30 January on Syria's prime military research establishment, the Scientific Studies Research Centre (SSRC), located at Jamaya north-west of Damascus. Israel's alleged motive was to prevent the transfer to Hizballah of sophisticated Russian weapons -- such as advanced radars and anti-aircraft missiles -- which might restrict Israel's freedom to strike Lebanon at will.

In fact, in mounting this latest attack, Israel's motives were probably more ambitious. As is well known, it is anxious to bring down the whole so-called 'resistance axis' of Iran, Syria and Hizballah, which in recent years has managed to develop a certain deterrent capability vis-à-vis Israeli power. Israel's bombardment of Syria's research establishment was very probably intended to provoke the 'resistance axis' into responding with an attack on an Israeli target - which would then have provided Israel with the pretext for an all-out assault.

Israel has a score to settle with Hizballah, which fought it to a draw when Israel last invaded Lebanon in 2006. Israel is also worried that the five members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (the so-called P5+1) might make progress at their next meeting with Iran, which is due to take place in Kazakhstan on February 25. It is particularly concerned at reports that the United States and Iran might engage in a bilateral dialogue, as U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden has recently hinted.

None of this is to Israel's taste. It has for years been urging the United States to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities – and bring down the Islamic regime – in much the same way that pro-Israeli neo-cons, using fraudulent intelligence, pushed the United States into invading and destroying Iraq in 2003. Equally, Israel does not want the Syrian opposition to engage in dialogue with the regime and arrive at a peaceful settlement. It wants Syria to be further enfeebled and dismembered, much as Iraq was a decade ago, and from which it has far from recovered.

Much will depend in the coming weeks on the wisdom of President Barack Obama's new team and, in particular, on the new Secretary of State John Kerry. Will he encourage negotiations to resolve the Syrian crisis peacefully so as to stem the destruction of the country and its people, as well as preventing the further destabilisation of Turkey and Lebanon, or will he play Israel's traditional game of subverting the region so as to reign supreme?

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