



# THE MIDDLE EAST

## Syria: The Mirror Walls of Shame!

*Articles and reflections by Dr. Harry Hagopian*

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**It does not take much specialist knowledge to realise that the Syrian people of all ethnicities and religions across many parts of the country are suffering in different ways and for different reasons. The country today faces two ostensibly immovable wills, that of a regime willing to use any form of bloody force to quell the popular uprisings that it largely considers as terrorist in nature and the disparate opposition forces that are equally determined to fight till the bitter end in order to remove a regime they consider illegitimate. No matter whoever ends up being Samson or Delilah in this polar battle of wills and brinkmanship, the ordinary people - whether silent, muzzled or vocal - are caught up in ever-increasing cycles of pain.**

Embattled citizens of this Arab heartland are suffering today because hardly anybody is truly interested in their fate. Instead, they are all focused on their own vested interests and their tactical rather than strategic advantages. Irrespective of the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) that has slowly inched its way into customary International law since the Balkans conflict, or even the attempts to come up with binding UNSC Resolutions, I would not hold my breath for a rapid breakthrough to this painful standoff between tanks and Kalashnikovs.

The UN that prides itself as the repository of International law and order has been thwarted yet again by its anachronistic structures and competing interests from passing any meaningful resolution through the Security Council that could matter-of-factly stare down the impunity of a Syrian regime. Only this week, it demanded that President Bashar al-Assad “immediately” implement special envoy Kofi Annan’s six-point plan to rein in the government’s bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protests. However, veteran analysts admit that such face-saving calls cannot easily yield any tangible results as evidenced by the latest [UN] Presidential Statement that carries no binding force or sanctions and is at best an attempt at verbal relevance.

The USA advocates democracy, expresses outrage and even calls for regime change whilst it perpetuates an obverse form of post-modern colonialism when it refuses for a whole slew of domestic or global considerations to act proactively in the Syrian debacle. The Obama Administration clearly does not wish to be dragged into this conflict and is far too ready to support Kofi Annan’s hard mission, even to praise the non-binding UNSC presidential statement (which remains a pallid shadow of earlier Arab League recommendations) so long as it avoids any action during an election year that would have al-Qa’eda steal candidate-Obama’s thunder by rearing its ugly head in Syria. Consequently, this administration once more finds itself bedevilled by its own paradoxes and by the political sophism of its commander-in-chief and is now in the rather surreal position of appearing closer to Russia and China than to some of its regional allies.

Similarly, the EU - chiefly the UK and France - have expressed righteous indignation and also imposed a raft of tepid economic or travel sanctions but then have sat back and watched with ‘consternation’ the bloodletting continue in Syria. Preventing Asma (Emma), the wife of the Syrian president, from travelling to Europe is in my coarse opinion the dampest of possible squibs and not truly of paramount concern to this London-born and bred woman. At best, it bears psychological significance. Yet, it remains clear in this Syrian instance, as it does with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that the EU key members are loath to act on their own without tangible US

support. Even Libya, a NATO-led and Franco-British choreographed operation, will not have jolted forward as a revolution without US tacit consent and assistance.

Turkey has also seen its mushrooming popularity in the Arab World over the past year wane significantly. After all, FM Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy doctrine of zero-problems has been rattled and its neo-ottoman regional ambitions have also been punctured in a rather undignified manner. Many Arabs in the region had high hopes for Turkey, but they now perceive it as having huffed and puffed only to be deterred by the USA from creating safe havens, humanitarian corridors or a buffer zone let alone organising or equipping the Free Syrian Army. These remain wish lists for PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan whose promises have been blunted by lack of delivery save in his hosting members of the Free Syrian Army as well as his noteworthy hospitality for those refugees from Syria who recently also received Tawakul Karman, the Yemeni Nobel laureate, in a compassionate show of solidarity that also echoed clear political messages.

Russia and China are in some sense the two political oddballs in this ongoing scenario. Slowly but surely, Russian FM Sergei Lavrov and his Kremlin bosses are chipping away at the parameters of this conflict and safeguarding their considerable military, commercial and financial interests whilst at the same time stunting what they perceive as American regional hegemony and a political "hustle" over Libya by the Western powers who suddenly changed the rules of the game. However, many observers expect the Russian position to soften somewhat - perhaps through the narrow aperture of Kofi Annan's efforts - as a result of the re-election of Vladimir Putin. Other analysts though counter that Syria is to Russia what Bahrain is to Saudi Arabia: in other words, just as the Saudi regime considers 'external encroachment' in Bahrain to be a strategic 'red line', Russia considers regime change in Syria as a direct challenge to its interests in the region too.

Israel markets itself as an oasis of democracy, and one would have expected it to support these 'democratic forces'. But does it do so, or is it in favour of the regime? Despite statements to the contrary by the likes of Foreign and Defence Ministers Avigdor Lieberman and Ehud Barak, I would surmise that Israel is quite willing to accept the uncondoned excesses of the Syrian regime against a cross-section of its own population so long as it maintains the status quo and the Golan Heights remain a calm front whilst Syria does not push Hezbollah in southern Lebanon into a diversionary confrontation with it and Hamas is kept under check by regional actors.

Meanwhile, the Arab League, with its 22 member-states (Syria is suspended since 12 November 2011), had in the past year tiptoed out of its torpor with uncanny haste. However, it has painfully realised that its impotence is institutional as much as structural and that it cannot deliver on its Qatari and Saudi promises. This will become even more evident during the 23rd Arab League Summit at the Republican Palace in Baghdad next week. Mind you, I do not wish to belittle the efforts of this body in trying to court relevance by resolving the Syrian issue but its ability to act decisively is nonetheless numbed by its sharp disagreements and weaknesses.

So leaving all third parties aside, what about the Syrians themselves - *ashab al-qarar* or decision-owners?

The "opposition" - the Syrian National Council, the Free Syrian Army, the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change or other movements - seem to contradict each other, spurn a common stand and in so doing render the alternative voice of change and reform less meaningful. The top echelons are bickering, come across as dyslexic and are emitting the wrong messages. Moreover, some elements within this inchoate body are also becoming increasingly strident. They now risk jeopardising further their own cause by stoking dangerous sectarian animosities should they go the way of brutal and violent tactics against their opponents. So much so that a public letter by Human Rights Watch dated 20th March asserted that armed units - the Free Syrian Army or other smaller entities - have engaged in human rights abuses including kidnapping, detention and executions of security forces and pro-government militia members. Sarah Leah Wilson, Middle East director at HRW, stated that "The Syrian government's brutal tactics cannot justify abuses by armed opposition groups. Opposition leaders should make it clear to their followers that they must not torture, kidnap, or execute under any circumstances." This is indeed both inexcusable and counterproductive, and such vengefulness - albeit

still minimal in comparison to the excesses of the Syrian regime which HRW also accused of using civilians in buses, in tanks and in the field as human shields - will only reconfirm the stereotype many people have of those protestors as free radicals who are intent on imposing their exclusive rule across the country.

There is also much talk about the small communities or those with special interests such as the powerful business elites in Aleppo or elsewhere in Syria who are at times described as abna' al nizam (sons of the regime). It seems that those business elites have gradually shifted their allegiances and loyalties anyway whilst the Kurds and Druze are more or less sitting on the fence as their adroit political leaders in Iraqi Kurdistan and Beirut - Masoud Barzani and Walid Jumblatt - continue with their deft political legerdemains to protect them. Indisputably though, the main rump that is constantly - and at times frankly quite disproportionately - in the limelight these days are Christians. Not a week passes without a statement by venerable Christian hierarchs or organisations across the MENA region or worldwide ostensibly alerting those who are undermining Syria and its reformative impulses by siding too bluntly with the protestors. Some have forewarned that the Arab "spring" could well turn into an Arab "winter".

Let me start off by admitting openly that the Christian world experiences a festering wound over Syria. The more I read those different hierarchical statements, or conversely meet with ordinary Christians, the more I fret about the future of those communities. Over the centuries, church leaders in the MENA region have often stood on the side of justice whilst also supporting their own flocks from the historical strains in Christian-Muslim relations. So do they know something that compels them to be ever so careful and even counterintuitive about those uprisings? And do they faithfully represent their grassroots? Why are some church leaders so concerned about the future of their communities that they refrain from criticising the authorities but are chary of the protestors?

In the midst of those shifts in Egyptian society - a creeping sense of xenophobia and traditionalism as well as a proclivity to make deals over the heads of those who were at the vanguard of the 25th January [2011] revolution - the Copts who constitute roughly 10% of the Egyptian population are also facing some painful but inevitable reality checks.

Mind you, not all Christian men and women are in one camp and I know many of them who already stand with the protestors or are willing to challenge their autocratic rulers despite the advice of their peers or leaders. Besides, do Christian biblical principles not suggest siding with the oppressed, disenfranchised, marginalised, imprisoned, hungry or naked in society? Are we witnessing impartiality, prudence, cynicism or plain fear?

I believe those same Christians also look at Iraq, Egypt, even Nigeria and other countries, where they are discriminated against with mounting vitriol and violence, and where they are being considered dhimmi-style second-class citizens. They worry - justifiably - about their safety. In fact, how ought those Christians to react when Wadi Ghoneim, an Egyptian Muslim scholar, declares publicly that the late Pope Shenouda III and the Copts are infidels? What about the statement by Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, that all churches in the Arabian Peninsula must be destroyed in response to a question from a Kuwaiti NGO delegation? As the Catholic Bishops in Austria stated this week, can such a fatwa be issued today without the knowledge of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud? If so, where does that place interreligious dialogue?

Moreover, what about the reports that Christians are being forced out of their homes in Homs, Syria, by armed men from the Farouq Brigade, allegedly linked to Wahhabi elements from al-Qa'eda and including mercenaries from Libya and Iraq, who describe Christian homes as 'war booty'. What about those Christians who have told me that they have been 'advised' to leave their homes in Syria and scarp to Lebanon? Are those the ideals that set off the heady days of the Arab awakening in Tunisia? It is not enough at all that highly respectable Muslim scholars like Dr Tareq Ramadan from Oxford University should appear on our television screens and benignly reassure his interlocutors that Islam is not exclusivist or rapacious. Rather, it is the quintessential duty of every responsible Muslim leader region-wide to desist making smug statements and insist instead that their Christian co-citizens are all engaged in the same struggle together for dignity, citizenship rights as well as social and economic justice.

Indeed, one such step was tentatively achieved last week when the Muslim Brothers of Syria declared their political charter that details their vision for a post-Assad Syria. Their ten vows endorse a pledge toward a civil, democratic and modern state that respects institutions, not religion, as the basis of political and social life and stresses the concept of citizenship. This is both robust and hopeful, and time will tell whether such a radical departure is a political ploy or a meaningful step forward that could well turn into an inclusive contract for all Syrians.

I am from London, not Damascus, and so my voice should count less than those living in the region. But like countless other ordinary lay believers, beholden together by a universal fellowship, I strive for equality and in so doing stand four-square behind any legitimate quest for freedom by the masses ...and support all democratic structures everywhere that rise out of free and fair elections ... irrespective of nomenclatures or terminologies ... so long as others also fully respect in return my normative values within society and recognise the merit of every man, woman or child without recourse to abstruse ascriptions or convoluted jurisprudence.

Much as I am discomfited by the statements of those hierarchs almost shielding their faithful from the Arab awakening and its thirsty struggle for fundamental freedoms, let me also segue bluntly that I - and countless others like me - would readily support those aspirations so long as we get a clearer signal of the nature of 'freedom' coming out of the new ME:NA and hear the affirmation of the main stakeholders that everyone will be able to live in equality, accountability, peace and security in their own homes and towns.

So all in all, where does one go from here in Syria? Will the meeting of the Friends of Syria in Istanbul on 2nd April adopt any substantive decisions that could relieve the current impasse? Or will more embassies simply shut their doors in Damascus? I am not a prophet to predict the future, but my recent conversations across a wide region and my discussions with opinion-makers would indicate a sliver of optimism and the tiniest spark of hope that the international community might well ache toward a consensus - vaguely along the Yemeni model - that would hobble toward an eventual - not rushed, not immediate, not ideal and not Qadhafi-style - post-Assad era. Failing this critical consensus, the killings will inexorably mount from both sides and the neighbouring countries will be sucked into a deeper black hole that vitiates the laws of gravity and causes further entropy.

The region - Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Morocco, Yemen and many others - is a tinderbox ready to be set ablaze. So can the collective wisdom of the international community overcome its short-term stratagems and leap forward with political determination? Or will the haunting predictions of a well-placed Syrian activist from Homs who wryly suggested to me that we are in for a decade of sporadic and prolonged civil wars indeed come true?

Syria: the mirror walls of our own collective shame - or perhaps one of our resurrected hopes?