

Syria: Potential fuse for greater conflagration

ERESH OMAR JAMAL

As the world is now well aware, Syria has been consumed by violence for years now. What people are less aware of, however, is why it has been raging for so long. According to the western narrative, the Syrian conflict — the deadliest conflict of the 21st century — started with Assad's forces violently clamping down on peaceful oppositions and protestors in March 2011, and will not end until the dictator, Assad, is removed from power, which is why they have vowed to continue their support for what they say are the legitimate democratic opposition groups.

The alternative narrative, mainly propagated by Assad and governments outside the western alliance bloc — Russia, China, etc. — is that outside forces are funding, arming and training violent opposition groups, to bring

is also a failed state.

Despite the disastrous interventions in Iraq and Libya and the fact that the majority of Syrians, even according to western polls, support Assad, (Le Figaro poll: Over 70 percent want Syria's Assad to remain in power, RT, October 31, 2015) the West has kept insisting that 'Assad must go' in the 'interest of democracy'. And to justify their stance, western governments have pointed to several atrocities allegedly committed by Assad against his own people. Some of which are, at best, dubious.

Take the West's allegation of Assad using chemical weapons in March 2013 for instance. In a report titled "Possible Implications of Faulty US Technical Intelligence," Richard Lloyd, a former United Nations weapons inspector, and Theodore Postol, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after examining the delivery rocket's design, concluded that the Sarin gas

intervention in Syria under that pretext? Why does it keep insisting then that it must have been Assad, without any conclusive evidence? It may have something to do with Assad's refusal to let a Qatari pipeline run through Syria, as I argued in my article 'Why Turkey is so important' published by *The Daily Star* on August 17. With that in mind, the West has admittedly supported what they call 'moderate opposition groups' such as the Free Syrian Army and others.

However, according to former CIA officer Ray McGovern, the groups that the US is funding are not really moderates but are considered to be extremists by many ('US pretends there are moderates in Syria, Russia understands they are all terrorists', RT, August 27). Syrians too seem to feel the same. A survey conducted by the Opinion Research Business International found that 81 percent of Syrians believe that ISIS "is a foreign/American made

very militants it is fighting". That their support was actually 'inadvertent', however, is quite hard to believe. As according to the Financial Times (London), militants in Syria were being supported by regional powers and "The Americans, of course, knew what was going on... [but had] ignored it". That too, despite recognising Assad's popularity in their own assessment report which was unearthed by the *Information Clearing House*; (NATO Data Assad Winning the War for Syrians' Hearts, June 4, 2013) refusing to sway from its seemingly crumbling narrative.

I say crumbling because many high ranking officials within western administrations have already broken free from it. They include the likes of General Wesley Clark, former Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO, who said on CNN that "ISIS got started through funding from our [America's] friends and allies". Former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, who told Congress in 2014, in response to a question by Republican Senator Lindsay Graham that "I know [of] major Arab allies [to the US] who fund them [ISIS]". Former head of the US Defence Intelligence Agency, Michael T. Flynn, who admitted to Mehdi Hasan on Al-Jazeera in 2015 that it was a "wilful decision" by the US government to support an insurgency [ISIS] composed of "Salafists, Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra", among others.

And although this in itself is concerning, what is even more so is the refusal on part of western governments to back down from its aim to remove Assad despite Russia entering the fray. Because now we have Russia doing air raids in Syria after being requested to do so by the Syrian government. We have NATO countries doing their air raids, 'illegally under international law', as they have not been invited by the Syrian government to enter its airspace, nor been given permission to do so by the UN Security Council. Turkey reportedly has entered Syria recently, allegedly, by some, to fight ISIS, and by others, to fight the Kurds. China said that they too are going to increase their involvement in Syria to help the government fight extremists.

What this means is that Syria is quickly turning into a powder-keg that can blow up any minute, leading to a much greater conflagration. Thus, it is best now for all sides to let cooler heads prevail rather than escalate the violence that has already led to millions of Syrians fleeing the war-torn country as refugees — contributing to the displacement of the highest number of people since the end of World War II — any further.

The super-powers involved have a special responsibility in that regard, as it is the unimaginable suffering of the Syrian people, who have, perhaps, had the least say in all of this, that is the greatest tragedy humanity is facing by allowing the crisis to perpetuate for this long.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

Allowance of war heroes doubled

Commendable act

We commend the government for its decision to raise the monthly allowance by two to threefold of the decorated and wounded freedom fighters. It is a step in the right direction as whatever these valiant sons and daughters of this soil and their family members had been getting was a meagre amount. This will greatly ameliorate the condition of the wounded freedom fighters, particularly, many of whom are passing their days in pecuniary privation.

Since assuming office in 2009 the Awami League government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina has taken a raft of measures to gradually improve the condition of the Freedom Fighters. A total 669 awarded freedom fighters as well as the families of seven Bir Shreshthos and around 12,500 injured freedom fighters are going to get the benefits. These are the people who have given us a country to call our own. After all, the nation will not be able to materialise the dreams of the martyrs of the Liberation War if we cannot even take care of our freedom fighters. In this light, doubling their allowance is indeed an acknowledgement of the sacrifice that they had made for this country, although nothing is a big enough recompense for their valour and courage.

Having said that, we believe that the government's responsibilities do not end here. A mammoth 1.02 lakh applications for freedom fighters' certificates are awaiting approval, a large number of them remain out of the government's safety net. Among them are the dead whose family members are living in abject poverty. Also, the administration should secure the disbursement process against likely malpractice.

Hajj flights completed

But why at the expense of other flights?

The good news is that Bangladesh Biman has managed to send all the intending Bangladeshi pilgrims to Saudi Arabia in time for hajj but some 300 passengers outbound on other flights had to suffer because the national carrier cancelled flights to three other destinations to accommodate the pilgrims. This should not have happened because the number of hajj passengers was known well in advance to Biman, so was the fact that in the initial stage many hajj flights had to be cancelled for lack of passengers due to various reasons. So the airline authorities could have made more judicious alternatives by advance planning and letting the passengers on other Biman flights know of the changes in advance.

We find unacceptable the indifference of Biman that it should feel no responsibility whatsoever to inform passengers of changes in flight schedules in advance. People are not travelling free on Biman and passengers are on a schedule themselves, there are women and children and often, the elderly, travelling to destinations for some purpose. The attitude of the national air carrier is that it is doing its passengers a favour, which seems sadly out of place especially where we find foreign airlines competing tooth-and-nail with one another for a share of the market.

The success of sending pilgrims to hajj on time is sadly marred by actions like this and all we can hope for is that Biman's management would try to do a better job next year because, at the end of the day, all its passengers are customers who have paid good money to avail its services.



Residents flee a site after an air strike on the rebel-held besieged town of Douma, eastern Damascus suburb of Ghouta, Syria.

PHOTO: REUTERS

about regime change in Syria, which is keeping the conflict ongoing, and has nothing to do with bringing democracy to Syria.

Before digging deeper, it is important to remember that some of the same allegations that are now being made against Assad — of being a dictator, oppressing his own people, etc. — were also made against Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi prior to the interventions in both Iraq and Libya. Other allegations later proven to be false — Saddam having weapons of mass destruction, for example — were also made by the accusers, who, ironically, had good relations with both Saddam and Gaddafi, prior to condemning them.

What has followed those interventions is now as clear as day. Libya, which was the richest country in Africa before the intervention, is now a failed state. Iraq has had no end to violence since the 2003 intervention and

"could not possibly have been fired at East Ghouta from the 'heart', or from the Eastern edge, of the Syrian government controlled area". Their claim has also been backed by others, including US missile experts (MIT study of Ghouta chemical attack challenges US intelligence, RT, January 16, 2014). Meanwhile, Die Welt a German daily reported that "the British secret service was in possession of a sampling of the used Sarin [on August 21, 2013, in Ghouta]. An analysis [of which] showed it not to be Sarin from the Syrian regime, but from the inventory of al-Nusra."

This indicates that western governments, through their intelligence wings, knew that Assad may not have been responsible for the attack, as concluded by the UN's Carla Del Ponte (UN's Carla Del Ponte says there is evidence rebels 'may have used sarin' in Syria, *The Independent*, May 6, 2013).

Why then did the West try to justify an

group". Such suspicions may not be totally baseless.

As a former director of the US National Security Agency, General William Odom once remarked, "the US has long used terrorism" to achieve its objectives... "In 1978-79 the Senate was trying to pass a law against international terrorism — in every version they produced, the lawyers said the US would be in violation" (America Created Al-Qaeda and the ISIS Terror Group, *Centre for Research on Globalisation*, September 19, 2014). On the British side, former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook similarly wrote a column for *The Guardian* in which he remarked that "Al Qaeda was unquestionably a product of Western intelligence agencies" (The struggle against terrorism cannot be won by military means, July 8, 2005).

Even the *New York Times* reported on March 14, 2015, that "[the CIA] has sometimes inadvertently financed the

Making peacekeeping work

BARONESS ANELAY

TOMORROW, London will host a day of talks dedicated to United Nations Peacekeeping and how to make it work better. The UK has invited ministers and representatives from over 70 countries and international organisations to participate in these discussions. We are delighted that Bangladesh has agreed to act as one of the co-hosts alongside the UK; we recognise the country's enormous contribution to the cause of peacekeeping operations, with upwards of 7,200 personnel deployed across the world on UN missions.

UN peacekeeping is facing new and previously unimaginable challenges. The last five years have seen a huge growth and evolution in deadly conflict, and UN peacekeeping has often been called upon by the international community to stem that tide.

In peacekeeping missions around the world, we are asking more of our peacekeepers than ever before. We expect them to protect not only civilians, but also to make credible elections possible, help states restore the rule of law and crucially, to enable the safe passage of life-saving humanitarian aid.

We all want and need the UN to have enough peacekeepers, with the right equipment and the right capabilities, to do their job wherever they are needed in the world. To achieve this, we need to focus on the three Ps of

Planning is about helping UN missions deploy to the right places, focus on the right

challenges, and identify what capabilities they need to get the job done. From design to deployment to the eventual drawdown, a mission needs to have a clear focus on what it is seeking to achieve.

Pledges is about ensuring that nations commit the troops, police and equipment that are needed to increase the range of capabilities available to UN peacekeeping. We

South Sudan. Here the UK military can use its exceptional engineering skills to make the sites where civilians take refuge safer and more secure.

Finally, we must see improved performance on the ground. To achieve that, all peacekeepers must be properly trained, equipped and vetted before they deploy. In the field, we need capable and courageous leaders. That is why

achieve that aim. The Summit generated new pledges of troops, training and equipment from more than 50 countries. Now those countries are coming back together in London to continue the work President Obama started. We will take stock of the pledges already delivered and encourage more. We will also look at how those new troops can be deployed faster and used more



need to generate these pledges and match them with the specific needs of individual missions; an excellent example of this working in practice was the deployment of Bangladesh's all-women police units to Haiti after a request from the Mission Commander. That is why the UK is doubling its military contribution to peacekeeping through deployments to Somalia and

the UK is not only training peacekeeping troops itself, but supporting programmes to improve training centres, using experiences gained from partners such as Bangladesh through your Institute of Peace Support Operations (BIPSOT) and to mentor potential mission leaders.

Last September President Obama hosted the Leaders' Summit on Peacekeeping to help

efficiently, and how women can play a stronger role in delivering peace and security.

The lives of millions of vulnerable people around the world depend on us ensuring peacekeeping meets these new and ever growing challenges.

The writer is a British Conservative Party politician, currently serving as Minister of State of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Introduce more buses at Farmgate



PHOTO: STAR

We appreciate the recent introduction of the 20 AC buses and 500 special rickshaws at Gulshan and Banani. But I wonder if the city authorities have ever seen Farmgate at peak hours and witnessed the plight of those who have to run and fight to board overloaded buses.

I suggest that BRTC double-deckers starting from Motijheel should have a third bus starting from Farmgate. And for the private bus operators who have city route permits crossing Farmgate — every fourth bus should start from Farmgate.

FM
 On e-mail

Gender discrimination

Even in this modern age, many men around the world consider themselves superior to women. Gender discrimination is a major barrier to human development. Until the mindset of people can be changed, this problem will never come to an end.

Zeeshan Nasir
 On e-mail

In peacekeeping missions around the world, we are asking more of our peacekeepers than ever before. We expect them to protect not only civilians, but also to make credible elections possible, help states restore the rule of law and crucially, to enable the safe passage of life-saving humanitarian aid.