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THE SYRIAN CRISIS: WHAT IT MEANS FOR THE WORLD; IS THERE A ROLE FOR CANADA?*

Ferry de Kerckhove

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Harper government has shown itself to be fully engaged and willing to take a public leadership position when it comes to the world's response to the Syrian crisis, but Canada has yet to commit to a military intervention. That may well be the most sensible approach.

There are many reasons that western countries have resisted a Libyan-style intervention in Syria, though there are compelling arguments on both sides. But with al-Qaida operatives involved in the uprising, uncertainty over how favourable a new regime would be towards the West, and the potential dangers posed by the conflict to Israel, one of Canada's staunchest allies, the Harper government's primary objective must be to ensure that the outcome of the Syrian civil war is compatible with western values.

One of Canada's top priorities must be helping to ensure that Syria, after the likely defeat of dictator Bashar Assad, rapidly returns to as much stability as possible, and avoids breaking down further into competing divisions and conflicts. The Harper government must be prepared to lend legitimacy to a new government in Syria, work more systematically with the Arab League to foster security in the region, prepare to be of assistance in a post-Assad reconstruction, and engage with other countries considering imposing a no-fly zone over Syria that might help impede Assad's brutality. There are no simple pathways to securing a peaceful, pro-Western Syria after Assad. But there are things Canada can do, besides military intervention, that can increase the likelihood of it.

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LA CRISE SYRIENNE: SA SIGNIFICATION POUR LE MONDE ET LE RÔLE POTENTIEL DU CANADA*

Ferry de Kerckhove

RÉSUMÉ

Le gouvernement Harper a démontré son intention d'assumer pleinement un rôle de leadership au sein de la communauté internationale dans sa réponse à la crise syrienne, mais le Canada n'a pas encore opté pour une intervention militaire. C'est sans doute l'attitude la plus sage.

Les raisons pour lesquelles les pays occidentaux ont jusqu'à présent hésité à s'engager en Syrie dans une intervention à la libyenne ne manquent pas, bien qu'il y ait des arguments convaincants des deux côtés. Cependant, étant donné que des éléments d'Al-Qaïda participent au soulèvement et qu'on ignore dans quelle mesure un nouveau régime serait favorable à l'Occident, sans oublier la menace d'un conflit possible avec Israël, un des plus fidèles alliés du Canada, le gouvernement Harper doit avoir pour principal objectif de s'assurer que l'issue de la guerre civile en Syrie est compatible avec les valeurs occidentales.

Le Canada doit contribuer en priorité à ce qu'après la défaite probable du dictateur Bachar El-Assad, la Syrie retrouve autant de stabilité que possible et évite de retomber dans la division et le conflit. Le gouvernement Harper doit être prêt à reconnaître un nouveau gouvernement syrien et travailler de façon plus systématique avec la Ligue arabe à favoriser la sécurité dans la région; il doit être disposé à contribuer à la reconstruction du pays après la chute d'Assad et s'engager auprès d'autres pays à considérer l'imposition d'une zone d'exclusion aérienne au-dessus de la Syrie de façon à entraver la brutalité d'Assad. Il n'existe pas de moyen simple de garantir une transition pacifique et favorable à l'Occident après la chute du régime d'Assad. Le Canada a toutefois les moyens d'agir pour que les choses évoluent en ce sens, sans envisager pour autant une intervention militaire.

* Cette recherche a été soutenue financièrement en partie par le gouvernement du Canada via Diversification de l'économie de l'Ouest Canada.

« Ce n'est jamais la lutte entre le bien et le mal, c'est le préférable contre le détestable »

Raymond Aron

The perennial question as to why *we* — i.e., the usual suspects from the so-called western world, plus an atrophied coterie of small Arab states — have not done in Syria what was done in Libya has a simple, if unsatisfactory, answer: because we cannot do it — at least not the way it was done in Libya. And that is not just because of the convenient Russian and Chinese vetoes at the UN Security Council, but because of the different situations on the ground and on the international stage. One important factor we tend to belittle is in fact the degree of support Bashar Al-Assad still seems to garner in the country. Only this — and the strength and support of the army — can explain his longevity. Yet, while it seems the end game is in sight, as the Syrian regime no longer has the capacity to win on military terms,¹ there is no doubt that the future of Syria represents a much greater challenge in terms of world peace and security than does Libya. For its part, Canada has been quite engaged with its allies on the Syrian crisis, starting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's May 24, 2012 announcement of "targeted sanctions" against members of the Syrian regime, in response to its crackdown on civilians. Indeed, Canada has considerable interest in helping to ensure that the final outcome is consonant with western objectives.

Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad's Syria

Syria's recent history mirrors that of other nations that are today seeing their political, social and economic landscape transformed by the Arab Spring. Independent since 1946, Syria had tumbled from one military coup to another, with a brief union with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt in between. Syria's loss to Israel in the 1967 war precipitated the country's takeover by Hafez Assad in 1971. Assad, who hailed from the Alawites, a minority offshoot of Shiite Islam, stayed in power until his death in 2000. After the brutal dictatorship of Hafez Assad, a lot of hopes were pinned on his son Bashar, who had been exposed to, if not nurtured by, western values and his British-born wife. However, the early repression of a budding "Damascus Spring" in his first year in power soon dashed these hopes.

The 2011 uprising

The Syrian protest movement, which started on March 15, 2011, owed a lot to Egypt's popular uprising. Syria has always had a complex love-hate relationship with Egypt, so the images of Tahrir Square had a particular resonance in Damascus. Assad initially reacted by taking a few popular measures aimed at "meeting the legitimate demands of the people." A small, emboldened minority deemed these to be insufficient and began small-scale protests, which were countered with brutal force and intimidation. Any hopes of major reforms were dashed by Assad at the end of March 2011, when he blamed the unrest on a conspiracy of outsiders. The repression started in Daraa and progressively spread to the whole country. The names Daraa, Latakia, Homs, Duma, Aleppo, and now Damascus have become synonymous with trails of bloodshed and horror. The regime was clearly prepared to sacrifice everything on the altar of preserving its hold on the country at any cost.

¹ As confirmed to the author on December 10 by a senior UN official in New York.

Initially it seemed the regime would prevail by using overwhelming force. It is a testimony to the courage of the protestors that it didn't. As the situation deteriorated, it was still believed that the government could prevail through attrition, with a blend of notional reforms and oppressive measures. Considering the early support for the president from the business community, tradespeople and minorities, particularly in Damascus, this would not have been an unrealistic outcome, were it not for the deep-seated rage against the regime, its military and its police, after the atrocities committed against the population in several cities. There was certainly no hope of the opposition achieving an early, massive symbolic victory, à la Tahrir Square, which would have left Assad with no other choice than to capitulate and grant the reforms demanded by the protestors. Thus the conflict mutated into an armed insurrection, eventually turning into a full-fledged civil war, as formally recognized on June 13, 2012 by UN peacekeeping chief Hervé Ladsous².

Canada's reaction to the Syrian crisis

While in the early days of the Arab Spring, Canada was accused of having a "... cautious approach toward the Arab Spring democracy movements ... in contrast to many other G8 nations,"³ when John Baird took over the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), the government's statements became much more straightforward. "We supported the aspirations of those peoples who sought for themselves and their countries brighter futures during the Arab Spring that just passed,"⁴ and Canada's contribution to Operation Unified Protector in Libya was nothing short of stellar. The Syrian crisis saw Canada at the forefront of the sanctions regime, contributing support for Syrian refugees to the tune of close to \$10 million, and providing visa assistance to Syrians in harm's way. Between May 2011 and October 2012, no less than 50 statements on Syria were made by either the prime minister or his foreign minister. Canada applauded the imposition of sanctions by the Arab League, calling it "another important signal from Syria's neighbours that the egregious behaviour of the Assad regime will not be tolerated,"⁵ and urged the UN Security Council to follow suit. There is no doubt that the Canadian government was and remains also quite preoccupied about the potential fallout from the uprising on Israel's security. The basic tenet of Canada's policy was expressed in simple terms: "Canada continues to work with the international community to pursue all diplomatic means to resolve the Syrian crisis."⁶ But there was not, and still is not, a specific Canadian diplomatic initiative.

² Louis Charbonneau and Dominic Evans, "Syria in civil war, U.N. official says," Reuters, June 12, 2012. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/12/us-syria-idUSBRE85B0DZ20120612>)

³ Campbell Clark, "PM resists calls for more aid to Arab states," *The Globe and Mail*, May 27, 2011, A13.

⁴ Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade John Baird at the United Nations General Assembly, Sept. 26, 2011.

⁵ John Baird, Nov. 27, 2011.

⁶ Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada media release, August 11, 2011.

International dimensions

One of the principal reasons behind the lack of any intervention, until recently, in the Syrian crisis, beyond condemnations and sanctions, is that Russia and China, still smarting from their Libyan debacle, vetoed nearly every single Security Council resolution on Syria, despite various attempts to placate their concerns. They also vetoed the transition plan put forward by the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) in February 2012, and they are accountable, in large part, for the failure of both the missions of former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. Syria's rebels have condemned the "West" for not coming to their assistance militarily and this could have an impact on future relations between the West and the new Syrian regime likely to emerge after Assad's eventual demise. Yet it may be that the Russian and Chinese vetoes have saved the West from a highly destructive and deeply destabilizing operation.

While President Barack Obama was among the first leaders to call for Assad's departure, Obama resisted the calls to arm the rebellion, expressing fear that the weapons would fall in the wrong hands since, increasingly, al-Qaida and other terrorist groups appeared to be participating in the uprising. The American position has evolved, however, and now, a few weeks after the November 2012 Doha meeting meant to reconcile all the Syrian Opposition factions, the U.S. has finally agreed to recognize the new National Syrian Coalition and its elected leader as the legitimate representatives of Syria. Canada for its part has not joined the consensus as it awaits confirmation that all Syrian minorities, notably the Alawites, will be included. But in an important development, Russian and American officials are now talking, and there are faint hopes they might reconcile their views in order to devise a new Security Council resolution.⁷

For its part, after the Doha meeting, the Arab League stopped short of giving the National Syrian Coalition full recognition as the sole representative of the Syrian people, as the league wants assurances that all opposition forces have been included in the group — a valid concern under the circumstances, but also an indication of divisions within the group and concerns among Arab leaders about what kind of post-Assad Syria might emerge.

"From friend to foe" summarizes Turkey's role and place today with regard to Syria, as it has become one of the key countries supporting the Syrian opposition. It refurbished its NATO credentials by getting the alliance to agree to provide Patriot missile-defense systems along Turkey's border with Syria. Yet there is no doubt that Turkey must be concerned about the possible rise of extremists within the National Syrian Coalition. Jihadists are part of the revolution, and Syrian minorities are already restless. Alawites are divided and the Kurds must be looking at the opportunity once again to claim a state of their own.

Of all the countries in the region, Iran stands to lose the most in not only seeing the Assad regime, its key ally, go down the abyss, but also in facing a more assertive Saudi Arabia and having to contend with the growing role of Turkey. While the Middle East peace process is more moribund than ever, for Israel the outcome of the Syrian civil war is a major source of concern as one of its most peaceful, albeit adversarial, relationships is under threat. In the short term, Israel is very legitimately worried about Syria's chemical weapons stocks, U.S. assurances notwithstanding.

⁷ The Russian counterpart to U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns is Mikhail Bogdanov, a remarkably sophisticated diplomat, fluent in Arabic and possessing an intimate knowledge of the region. He was the author's colleague in Egypt.

Towards an endgame?

The key debate surrounding the Syrian crisis centres around military intervention or, at least, a more systematic military assistance program. The GCC countries, notably Qatar, are arming the Syrian rebels, and weapons are getting into the country from various quarters. But is a military intervention advisable? On the negative side, the arguments are well rehearsed, often in contrast with Libya: the complications presented by a dense population; risks of heavy losses; continued tension between the Russian-Chinese-Iranian “bloc” and the West; deep concern and unknowns about what kind of post-Assad Syria would emerge, notably with respect to the various minorities in the country (e.g., Alawite vs. Sunni, Kurds, etc.); the belief that sanctions might produce a less ominous outcome⁸; and, after Iraq and Afghanistan, quite simply the general lack of appetite for yet another war in a Muslim country, without knowing whether a military intervention would bring about a regime that is favourable to the West.

On the positive side, there is of course the continued suffering of the population which argues for a humanitarian intervention along the “Responsibility to Protect mantra”; the likely expanding influence, as time goes by, of more nefarious groups within the rebel forces (e.g., al-Qaida types), which only Western forces could forestall; the need to provide a disciplined “encadrement” to disparate forces; the need to support the flailing efforts of the Arab League; and the Iranian factor.

The nature of the intervention depends very much on the objectives that are pursued. Clearly the paramount objective is the end of the bloodshed in Syria. That would militate for a political solution. However, regime change — i.e., the departure of Assad — has become an objective in itself, pitting the two “blocs” against one another. While providing weapons to the rebels would appear to be a legitimate objective, in addition to the worry as to whose hands the weapons might fall into, there is the Libyan-inspired, highly warranted concern about the additional trouble that a fresh supply of arms would bring to the civilian population of Syria.

An increasing number of scholars, thinkers and activists argue that Syrian rebels should be provided with military aid.⁹ The argument is quite simple: To the extent that a political solution is not in the cards and that a direct military intervention is both unlikely and dangerous, providing weapons to the rebels is the *only* solution to speeding up the end of the conflict. The rationale is powerful: 1) the rebels are already receiving some weapons; 2) at this stage, increasing weapon deliveries will not add to the unacceptable death toll, given the existing imbalanced level of force, which can only prolong Assad’s resistance and the risk that he might use chemical weapons; 3) while there is always a risk of weapons falling into the hands of terrorists, the sooner the National Coalition is empowered, the more likely will it be able to regulate the use of weapons delivered from abroad, particularly heavy weaponry.

⁸ For instance, on Nov. 28, 2012, in response to the continued gravity of the situation in Syria, Canada imposed further sanctions against Syria under the Special Economic Measures Act.

⁹ See: Trudy Rubin, “Worldview: US Still Refusing to Aid Rebels,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec.10, 2012; Raghida Dergham, “The US Adopts a New Policy on Syria,” Dec. 7, 2012 (<http://www.raghidadergham.com>); and Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, “Il Faut Armer les Rebelles Syriens,” *Le Monde*, Dec. 7, 2012.

More recently, with the rebels' gains in Aleppo and in the north of the country, there could be the option of a limited no-fly zone over that region. Democrat Senator Carl Levin, who chairs the Senate's armed services committee, suggested that the U.S. consider a no-fly zone if the opposition unites.¹⁰ The concern about Assad's potential use of chemical weapons — a very real one as the Syrian leader and his clique turn desperate — gives credence to any measure hastening his demise. Canadian foreign minister, John Baird, has strongly backed U.S. warnings to Syria about its chemical weapons and has adopted the "serious consequences" mantra.

A more activist role for Canada?

Over and beyond the immediate concerns about the end of the civil war in Syria, there is the more ominous preoccupation about what kind of Syria might emerge thereafter. Some even refer to "Syrias," with harrowing consequences for the whole region.¹¹ There are options for Canada to contribute to a more rapid conclusion to the crisis, which in turn would help avoid a breakdown of Syria.

- The easiest would be recognizing the new government of Syria along the lines of the U.S., something that Mr. Baird wants to discuss first with the Prime Minister and his Cabinet.
- Canada should engage the Arab League more systematically. It is an institution in need of assistance and its present leader is on the right side of history. We should help him build it on more solid ground.
- Canada should engage with the countries that envisage a no-fly zone, firstly with the U.S. but also with countries in the region that could be involved.
- Canada should stand ready to assist in the post-Assad reconstruction and in ensuring a process of disarmament and reconciliation is initiated.
- Canada's support for Israel is unwavering and anything Canada does to facilitate the transition in Syria would have an impact on Israel's security.

Canada is always a better country when it engages. A measured, sophisticated contribution to peace and security in the region is in Canada's tradition.

¹⁰ See Nick Ottens, "Senator: Syrian No-Fly Zone if Opposition Unites," *Atlantic Sentinel*, Nov. 25, 2012.

¹¹ See, for instance: Tony Burman, "If Syria Splits Apart, So Might the Entire Region," *Toronto Star*, Dec. 8, 2012.

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