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by Rolf Holmboe
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POLICY UPDATE

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The War on Terror after 9/11 led the West to massive military and stabilisation interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and also Libya. The cost has been great, and today many question what results were achieved and whether the negative consequences were in fact not greater than any beneficial effect. When the Syrian regime turned guns on protesters in 2011 and the uprising turned to civil war, the international community's appetite for interventions had abated. This was the lease on life the Syrian regime needed: they realized that they would have a free hand in quashing the uprising with whatever means at their disposal and with whatever methods they saw fit.

In 2015, Russia saw this weakness of the West and used it to re-impose themselves onto the scene in the Middle East as the sponsor of the Shi'a side in the raging regional conflict between Sunnis and Shi'as. This has served only to prolong both the war in Syria and Sunni/Shi'a conflict. Since, they have been stringing the West along by the nose – feigning an interest in a political solution, but in reality supporting Assad's strategy of total victory.

In 2013, facing defeat, the Syrian regime supported by Russia, Iran and Hizbollah changed tactics. Instead of fighting rebels head-on in urban areas, where they could never win, they pulled back, preferring to dominate the communication routes between the rebel areas with their armoured units. Then they concentrated their forces on besieging one rebellious area after another from a safe distance, cut off medical supplies, food, water and electricity and systematically started barrel bombing the entire area. Targeted airstrikes were used to bomb key targets, such as hospitals, schools and market places. Recently, regime forces supported by Hizbollah, Iranian, Iraqi and Russian forces succeeded in enclosing Syria's second largest city, Aleppo. Even if the siege was broken by the rebels, the regime allies are concentrating unprecedented forces to win a victory in Aleppo and with it, in their view, the war. The purpose of this tactic is the same as Russia's in Grozny, Chechnya some years earlier. Don't focus on the rebels, because you can never hit an asymmetric enemy effectively, focus on the population and starve and bomb them into submission. It is a modernized version of the "total war" concept, adapted for the convenience of petty dictators. And to the great loss of the world, Medieval tactics of siege and suppression do actually work.

But doing nothing in Syria has come at a high price for the region and for the West.

If the war is left unresolved, the whole Middle East is doomed to a spiral of economic and political failure and increasing instability with massive negative consequences for the region and broader. The war in Syria has developed from an uprising against tyranny into a fully-fledged regional sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shi'as. It is currently raging as proxy wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, pitting Iran as the main regional Shi'a power against Saudi Arabia as the main sponsor of the region's Sunni regimes. When Iran intervened in Syria and in Iraq, it brought regional rivalries into open confrontation and the wars became sectarian. Today, the likelihood of a further escalation is so much greater. At the same time, the effects of the regional conflict are devastating in terms of widespread instability, economic slow growth and continued



socio-economic crisis in the entire region. This negative spiral could form the basis for much more devastating revolutionary upheavals in the future. A break-down in Egypt, for instance, entrenched in autocracy, mired in deep socio-economic crisis and with a population almost four times that of Syria could have far greater consequences for the region as well as for Europe. The whole region will pay the price of Assad's determination to stay in power.

The wars in Syria and Iraq have produced an enabling environment without precedent for the growth of radicalism and extremist groups such as ISIS. As part of a very cynical policy, Assad has directly spurred and aided the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS and Jabhet al Nusrah, now called Jabhet Fatah al Sham, because they are useful tools for him. When the world sees ISIS as a greater evil than himself and deflects attention to fighting it, the Syrian regime gets off the hook. ISIS has drawn in many thousands of marginalized youths from all over the world, it has linked with other extremist groups regionally and globally and it is the needle's eye of the largest extremist ideology and virtual network the region has yet seen. And now, as ISIS is coming under increasing pressure in its' so-called Caliphate, it has directly launched and indirectly inspired terrorist attacks across the world, especially in Europe. Doing nothing in Syria is pushing more and more to radical groups that have been most effective in the fight against the regime – for them, the West cannot be trusted to help. The region and the world is paying the price of Assad's cynical policies in the form of a massive rise in radicalism and terrorism.

The war in Syria has produced one of the largest refugee crises since the Second World War with unmeasurable social costs, and in financial terms it is costing neighbouring states and Europe many billions of dollars every year. It has displaced more than 13,5 million Syrians, of which more than 4,8 million refugees have fled outside Syria. They flee not only the indiscriminate warfare of the Syrian regime; brutal and random repression ensures that Sunnis cannot live safely in regime-held areas. The net effect is an ethnic cleansing of Syria's majority Sunni population. If Assad is able to remain in power, a great part of the refugees, if not most, will not be able to return to Syria – because of the fact that they are Sunnis. With Assad, the world is therefore looking at a long-lasting refugee crisis much greater than for instance the original Palestinian diaspora in 1948 that has grown to more than five million. Neighbouring countries Lebanon and Jordan have been brought to the brink of collapse under the refugee burden, and Turkey is with more than 2.7 million the largest single recipient of Syrian refugees. By May of this year almost 1.1 million Syrians had applied for asylum in Europe, most arriving within the span of just one year. This migratory pressure may be partly checked by controlling measures, but essentially it will continue until the war is stopped. The greatest cost is arguably the lost generation of Syrian children who without education and social roots are destined to become marginalized socially and economically as they reach adulthood. A few years from now and left unchecked, this could provide a ripe recruiting base for both criminal networks and extremist groups. And the financial cost to Europe is staggering. Germany alone, which at 300.000 has received by far the most refugees, expects to spend almost 20 Billion USD in 2016 on coping with the influx, and a report from the Cologne Institute of Economic Research has estimated the



cost to Germany at a massive 50 Billion USD for 2016 and 2017. Again, Syria's neighbours and Europe will generously be footing the bill to keep Assad in power.

The coincidence in time of the migration crisis with the current spate of ISIS related terrorist attacks, without implying any link between the two phenomena, is directly influencing politics in Europe. After building the European internal market, which is at the core of Europe's economic competitiveness and wealth, borders have been re-established across Europe under the pressure of migration, and it is contributing to the massive upturn for populist rightist parties across Europe challenging the very foundation of European stability and affluence after the Second World War. The Syrian regime's strategies and actions are having a direct and serious effect on Europe, the cost of which is immeasurable.

On a higher level, Syria is ground zero in the battle for primacy of political systems, pitting autocracies against Western liberal democracies. Just a few years ago in 1989, as the Berlin Wall tumbled down – democracy was hailed as the ultimate winner in the political struggle against tyranny such as authoritarian communism and fascism. Since then, democracy has been rolled back globally: authoritarianism has reinvented itself and has gone on the offensive with Russia and China in the forefront followed by a host of regional satellites. The support for democracy is weakening even in its' own heartland as dangerous populist tendencies are flooding the Western world, forming at least mental ties with authoritarian models. Syria is the place where Russia, with considerable success, has forged a military alliance with a regional autocratic power (Iran), taking Middle East politics back to the times of the Cold War and military tactics back to the Middle Ages. The message of their successful Syria strategy is clear: if autocracies stick together, they can block out the West from influence and counter any attempt at regime change, committing war crimes and crimes against humanity with impunity. One cost of doing nothing in Syria is the undermining of democracy as a viable political system and a solid contribution to rolling back the whole system of universal freedoms and international law that has painstakingly been built up after the Second World War.

In the end, the costs of doing nothing are by far outstripping the cost of doing something in Syria. And doing something does not have to mean a new Iraq or Afghanistan.

It is not an insurmountable task to set the table for a political solution in Syria. Apart from Assad and his inner circle, very few inside Syria are not ready to stop the war and negotiate a deal with the other side. One key to peace in Syria is to take Assad out of the equation, because he cannot survive in power unless he wins the war outright and keeps his full control of the army and security services, and he has successfully convinced his allies to pursue a course of military victory, irrespective of time, blood and treasure. With Assad, there can be no peace, just a Syria in pieces. Another key is therefore to forge a deal at the international and regional level first, involving crucially Iran, Saudi Arabia and Russia, because then the Assad regime would not be able to continue blocking a peace deal.



If Assad is removed from power with his small inner circle of cronies, it would set the scene for a negotiated settlement as the most viable option of safeguarding Russian and Shi'a interests. Assad's removal would immediately open the possibility of reality-based talks between the Syrian government and the Syrian rebels and opposition, and an equitable peace deal would subsequently allow for the return of refugees. It could also provide the basis for forming new regional alliances that could deal much more effectively with extremist groups.

All it would take is for the US, Canada and Europe to say enough is enough. There are several options available to achieve a change of strategies in Syria.

One option is to re-establish a very credible Western threat to narrowly target Assad and key regime assets until Assad is gone or removed from power. When the US and allies threatened intervention in Syria in 2013, following the blatant use of gas by the Syrian regime against its own population, Russia immediately rallied the regime to give up chemical weapons to avoid it. Assad got off the hook then, even if he in open disregard of the international community has used chemical weapons multiple times since. With this one exception, the political will in the West to engage in a solution has not been strong enough in light of financial constraints and a certain weariness after the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan. This option would also be more complex now, with the Russian intervention in full gear. But it is Europe that is paying the very steep price for Russian adventurism, not Russia, and that price will multiply over the coming years. And the best strategy of intervention would in any case be much more limited and very different from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another option would be to bring Syria into the context of greater relations between the West and Russia and exert such pressure as to persuade Putin to a change of course in Syria. Russia has engaged at an all-in unprecedented level in the battle for Aleppo, and this might be a window of opportunity, if the regime allies do not succeed in taking Aleppo. If so, Russia and Iran would be faced with the choice of further escalating the military intervention with no end in sight or opt for a political solution instead of a military one. In such a negotiation, there are many carrots and sticks that can be used. It would be important for Putin to be able to claim a face-saving victory for his interventionist policies, and this includes his new patronage role for the Shi'a regimes in the Middle East as well as his energy interests in the region. It would also be important to accept certain safeguards for Shi'a populations and regimes in the region.

The worst outcome of the Syria war would be a victory for Assad and his allies Russia, Iran and Hizbollah. For peace to be sustainable, an ethnic war has to be settled, not won. A regime victory would mean a continuation of Assad's massive apparatus of repression, which at this moment is holding more than 250,000 men, women and children captive under the most barbaric of conditions. It would bring the regional Sunni/Shi'a conflict to a completely new level and lead to a long and violent split of the region into Sunni and Shi'a spheres of interest. It would break down the whole Middle East order that has reigned for the last 100 years (the so-called Sykes-Picot borders), setting off a host of new conflicts and upheavals, and it would spur an even



further growth in radicalism and extremism. Migration would just continue to increase, and a new “surge to Europe” might prove even more unstoppable than the current one.

In the immortal words attributed to the British parliamentarian Edmund Burke, “all it takes for the triumph of evil, is for good men to do nothing”.

▶ **About the Author**

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▶ **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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