

When Elephants Fight, It's the Grass That Suffers

Laila Al-Soulaiman

Publicly, the United States positions itself as the world's protector and enforcer of democracy. This role, however, is more preferential than universal. The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), the United Nations' designated source for casualty information in the area, documented at least 1,232 civilian casualties in Syria in Dec. 2014.¹ Of those, the Assad regime is responsible for 1,049, or more than 85 percent.² Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Shams (ISIS) was responsible for just over 5 percent of the civilian deaths in Dec. 2014.³ Although this is only a small portion of the five-year death toll, these statistics show that while ISIS has gained a reputation as the global synonym for brutality, it isn't nearly as deadly as the Syrian government. To kill at such a rate and scale,

the Assad regime employs frequent and indiscriminate airstrikes on civilian neighborhoods. By contrast, ISIS works on the ground to stage, most notably, summary executions and car bombs. ISIS's small scale attacks, however, have drawn the attention of the U.S., while the most dangerous threat to civilians, Bashar Al-Assad, has been afforded the luxury of American diplomatic complacency.

In Feb. 2011, in the southern Syrian city of Daraa, a group of children between the ages of 10 and 18 wrote anti-regime graffiti on the walls of a school.⁴ Echoing calls of the blossoming Arab Spring, they wrote, "The people want the fall of the regime. Your turn is coming, doctor."⁵ The subsequent response from President Bashar Al-Assad was

unprecedented: security forces kidnapped, detained, and tortured the children for their dissent. When they were finally released their bodies showed signs of brutal mutilation including extracted fingernails, broken bones, and lash wounds. In response to this incident, the people of Daraa took to the streets in protest, and not long after, all of Syria erupted in support of them.

To quell the dissent, the Assad regime unleashed a state-sponsored nationwide hellfire. The regime placed entire cities under siege where security forces, the primary apparatus of the state, targeted and killed countless unarmed civilians. Snipers were positioned atop buildings, daring anyone to travel outside the shadows. People were kidnapped from their homes and detained, never to be heard from again. Homes were pillaged and entire neighborhoods were destroyed by intense air artillery. Sexual violence was rampant. Bread, a staple government subsidy, was strategically withheld and then released to bait the starving population out from cover, where they would be shelled with barrel bombs. Electricity was cut, leaving people without heat during the winter. Internet and telephone use was severely restricted and monitored, and any infraction provoked possible detention. Like the long line of dictators before him, Assad reasoned that the most effective way to quell dissent was to kill all of those with a voice.

The world watched and hesitated as Syrians were slaughtered without any means of protecting themselves. During this time, the rhetoric of the Obama administration suggested a genuine desire to support local democratic movements, consistent with those

of the Arab Spring. In Aug. 2011 President Obama said:

“THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN INSPIRED BY THE SYRIAN PEOPLES’ PURSUIT OF A PEACEFUL TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY. THEY HAVE BRAVED FEROCIOUS BRUTALITY AT THE HANDS OF THEIR GOVERNMENT. THEY HAVE SPOKEN WITH THEIR PEACEFUL MARCHES, THEIR SILENT SHAMING OF THE SYRIAN REGIME, AND THEIR COURAGEOUS PERSISTENCE IN THE FACE OF BRUTALITY – DAY AFTER DAY, WEEK AFTER WEEK. THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT HAS RESPONDED WITH A SUSTAINED ONSLAUGHT. I STRONGLY CONDEMN THIS BRUTALITY, INCLUDING THE DISGRACEFUL ATTACKS ON SYRIAN CIVILIANS IN CITIES LIKE HAMA AND DEIR AL ZOUR, AND THE ARRESTS OF OPPOSITION FIGURES WHO HAVE BEEN DENIED JUSTICE AND SUBJECTED TO TORTURE AT THE HANDS OF THE REGIME. THESE VIOLATIONS OF THE UNIVERSAL RIGHTS OF THE SYRIAN PEOPLE HAVE REVEALED TO SYRIA, THE REGION, AND THE WORLD THE ASSAD GOVERNMENT’S FLAGRANT DISRESPECT FOR THE DIGNITY OF THE SYRIAN PEOPLE.⁶⁴”

It was in this Aug. 2011 speech that President Obama explicitly called for Assad to step aside for the first time. It took six months of indiscriminant civilian killing to warrant this stance. The delayed response to the initial siege of Daraa is the first of many pivotal moments where the U.S. floundered. Even a cursory look at the conflict makes clear that the American policy regarding Syria has been a reactionary and inconsistent realpolitik mess. This strategy is commonly referred to as “leading from behind.”

As the policy has evolved along with the ever-changing dynamics on the ground, it is clear that there are inherent contradictions between the moralistic rhetoric of policy and

the amoral empirical realities of policy implementation. U.S. government officials have publicly pledged their support of the Syrian people, called for the abdication of Assad, and stated that the use of chemical weapons is a red line that, if crossed, would provoke military intervention. The U.S., however, has delivered on none of these commitments.

The discrepancy between promises and reality makes it seem as though the policy is a failure of implementation rather than conception. In truth, the Obama administration's plan for Syria has not been a series of miscalculated missteps. The Syria strategy has done exactly what it was intended to do: maintain the status quo of instability in order to have leverage over Iran as well as to continue the expansion of counterterrorism efforts. In this regard, the conflict in Syria has been very little cost to the U.S. while providing incredible potential gain.

After the U.S. spent two years declaring "Assad must go" without providing any substantial military aid to opposition groups like the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a vacuum of strategy and execution occurred when Assad began to use chemical weapons. When the first evidence of chemical weapon usage emerged, the Obama administration vacillated, signaling that it neither had the political will nor a military plan. This only emboldened Assad, who finally caught the attention of the international community when 1,400 people were killed by sarin gas in Damascus in Aug. 2013.⁷ Developed in 1938 as a pesticide, sarin gas is one of the most toxic and rapidly acting nerve agents. In its

pure form, it is a clear, odorless, colorless and tasteless liquid that can be fatal just after one minute of exposure, even in low doses.

President Obama and his advisers, led by Secretary of State John Kerry, immediately declared that the red line had been crossed and military action was imminent. Obama, of course, *backed away* from the red line, choosing to seek congressional approval first, later scrapping a strike altogether in favor of an international agreement to strip Syria of its chemical weapons. The "Framework for the Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons" included provisos that Syria provide a comprehensive listing of its weapons to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and sign the Chemical Weapons Convention.⁸ Both have yet to be finalized, and the expected mid-2014 completion date has passed. Moreover, slightly less toxic chemicals like ricin and chlorine are not on the list of prohibited chemical covered by the disarmament agreement, and the United Nations reports that these chemical continue to be used in Syria today.⁹

In order to carry out the agreement to destroy the weapons, the OPCW needs a reliable partner, and it has arguably found one in Assad, who appears to be going along with the plan, though at a leisurely pace. In this regard, Assad's rise in legitimacy within the international community was contingent upon the chemical weapons deal. It essentially promised the Assad regime that the U.S. would not use military force in exchange for the destruction of certain chemical weapons and their facilities. This deal was considered a success in Washington because diplomacy

Not only is the presence of foreign militants part of Assad's calculation, but he has also taken a step further to allow radicalism to breed within Syria.

was able to rid Assad of his chemical weapons as well as prevent their use without military actions. This agreement epitomizes the delusional sweet-spot compromise the Obama administration is trying to strike between isolationist and interventionist policy.

The immediacy of the international community's response to Assad's use of chemical weapons, however, is striking. It suggests not only the magnitude of chemical weapons being used, but that they threaten international order and state sovereignty. States are historically far more terrified of weapons that can, once deployed, backfire on them or fall beyond sovereign control than equally horrifying weapons, whose deployment and effects are more subject to the limitations states place on them. Assad's use of chemical weapons was said to cross a red line because it irrevocably disrupted the lax standards set by the said community.

The implications of this agreement, however, are disturbing. They give Assad the green light to continue systematically killing his own people with conventional weapons of

war. These include, but are not limited to: barrel bombs, starvation, sexual violence, exposure to the elements, mass executions, targeting civilian neighborhoods and hospitals, torture, withholding subsidies, and indefinite detention. Assad, however, has publicly and repeatedly attributed this violence to armed foreign terrorist gangs since the beginning of revolution, a claim rejected by human rights organizations.¹⁰

The FSA was founded on Jul. 29, 2011, six months after the siege of Daraa. The first signs of radical ideological groups emerged in Jan. 2012 when Jabat Al-Nusra, a faction of Al-Qaeda, released a public statement calling for armed struggle against the Syrian government. This was after 10 months of violent government suppression. It is not a surprise, though, that as the violence continued, foreign militants flocked to Syria in pursuit of their own agendas. As the historical trajectory of revolutions would suggest, the that longer violence continues, the more radical people become. This was Assad's self-fulfilling prophecy.

Not only is the presence of foreign militants part of Assad's calculation, but he has also taken a step further to allow radicalism to breed within Syria. WikiLeaks reports have shown that the Assad regime has strategically released political prisoners who are known to have radical ideologies.¹¹ Moreover, the regime is informally cooperating with these same radical militants. As reported by an anonymous source in the Telegraph, the regime presently has a financial relationship with ISIS. It has purchased fuel from ISIS-controlled areas.¹² It's also

particularly telling that radical groups — namely ISIS — and the regime are not fighting each other.¹³ Both the regime and ISIS are also occupied with fighting the FSA and killing civilians.

Assad's self-fulfilling prophecy was that the presence of radical militants, whether foreign or locally bred in his prisons, would undoubtedly muddy the reputation of the FSA as a moderate rebel group and provide a distraction from the crimes of the regime. The U.S.'s terrorist tunnel vision also plays well into Assad's strategy. It's as if the mere presence of Islamic militants begets a narrative that the entire revolution has become a sectarian jihadist war. This, however, isn't the case. There's great diversity within the ideology of the umbrella group FSA, although the U.S. seems unable and unwilling to identify them.

The CIA's system of identifying moderate forces — which is antiquated and dysfunctional at best, disastrous at worst — is dictating the nature of the conflict entirely. The system, designed during the Cold War, isn't able to fully identify moderate FSA units or individuals for several reasons. First, the system fails to understand and integrate the historical and contemporary regional dynamics or account for Syrian ethnic, tribal and religious dynamics.¹⁴ Second, the CIA does not have a physical presence in Syria and must rely primarily on secondhand information, or possible third party actors. Third, and most importantly, the inability to positively identify moderate units has amplified the distrust of the FSA, which has hampered the delivery of arms and equipment to it. Moreover, these structural inadequacies

and ineptitudes aid in creating a perception that dramatically alters the narrative of the conflict and the international response it dictates. The flaws within the CIA system have in part caused the recent shift in policy towards the singular goal of combating terrorism with the help of Assad himself.

The current U.S. policy is one of “uncoordinated deconfliction” with Assad's regime in the fight against ISIS, according to one U.S. official.¹⁵ It's not a formal alliance, but the regime made a tacit agreement to avoid firing on coalition strike aircrafts. This is juxtaposed with long delays in the Obama administration's “train and equip” program for the Syrian opposition as well as the president's Oct. 2014 letter to Iran's Supreme Leader on unity against ISIS.¹⁶ These simultaneous interactions between peoples, state and non-state actors, and policies suggest that the United States is heading into a de facto alliance with Assad and Tehran against ISIS. Hence, the U.S. is able to maintain the status quo of the conflict in order to coordinate with Iran. In this regard, Assad and the U.S. share a common enemy in ISIS.

This alliance is a blow to the FSA and the urgent support they need to counter both ISIS and Assad's forces. If ISIS is weakened or defeated, a new power vacuum will exist in their stronghold. One possibility is that moderate opposition groups will be unable to fill it without international backing. And if they cannot, the Assad regime will. This is just as Assad intended in his deterrent strategy. Meanwhile, the existence of moderate forces continues to be overlooked by the U.S. The moderate forces that are worthy of attention

What remains clear is that the U.S. faces an impasse due to its irrevocable decisions, and whatever is to occur in the future will ultimately be decided by the will of the Syrian people.

fade into the background, or cease to exist at all, as bit players in a narrative wrongly and unfairly dominated. ISIS presents itself as the only alternative to Assad, and he purports to be the last line of defense against ISIS. As a result, both become stronger.

But while Secretary of State John Kerry has acknowledged the symbiotic nature of the relationship between ISIS and the Syrian regime, the Obama administration has repeatedly refused to lay out actions that could force Assad from power. Asked on Nov. 16 if the United States was actively discussing ways to remove Assad as part of a political transition, Obama answered simply: "No." This suggests that because Assad poses no threat to the U.S., intervention will not occur. Thus, it has become increasingly clear that in his realpolitik, balance-of-power containment strategy on Syria, President Obama is willing to accept Assad's presence as well as coordinate with him, while the stated strategy has purportedly shifted from liberation to focusing entirely on counterterrorism. This

policy seems to be self-defeating because it aims to combat terrorism with the help of a leader who commits state-sponsored terrorism. If the Obama administration continues this policy, it will merely contain ISIS, but not "defeat" or "destroy" the group.

There should be no question as to whether the U.S. addresses the brutal reign of ISIS or the state-sponsored terrorism of Assad. Such a decision is shortsighted at best and debilitating at worst. A dichotomy does exist. There isn't a diplomatic silver lining in this conflict. If the U.S. doesn't demand the abdication of Assad and his regime, the U.S. is implicitly lending its support to a war criminal who has killed more than 200,000 of his own people. As it currently stands, the administration's foreign policy response to Syria has left many questions unanswered. On one hand, the lack of impactful initiatives to deter the bloodshed over the past five years makes it clear that the U.S. policy did not aim to do so in the first place. If the U.S.'s response to this crisis continues in its current form, and Assad's regime continues, violence and repression will persist. To this end, democracy will be impossible in Syria, and those who will truly bear the burden of such inaction will be the people of Syria. What exact proposals in need of reversing this conflict are uncertain, but what remains clear is that the U.S. faces an impasse due to its irrevocable decisions, and whatever is to occur in the future will ultimately be decided by the will of the Syrian people.

¹ “1851 people were killed in December: Death Toll for December 2014.” Syrian Network for Human Rights. January 2, 2015. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Syria: How It All Began.” GlobalPost. April 23, 2011. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

⁵ “The Syrian Schoolboys Who Sparked a Revolution | The National.” The Syrian Schoolboys Who Sparked a Revolution | The National. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

⁶ Phillips, Macon. “President Obama: ‘The Future of Syria Must Be Determined by Its People, but President Bashar Al-Assad Is Standing in Their Way.’” The White House. August 18, 2011. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

⁷ “More than 1,400 Killed in Syrian Chemical Weapons Attack, U.S. Says.” Washington Post. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

⁸ “Joint National Paper by the Russian Federation and the United States of America: Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons.” OPCW Executive Council. September 20, 2013. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

⁹ “Report of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.” Human Rights Council. August 13, 2014. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

¹⁰ “Syrian TV -.” Syrian TV -. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

¹¹ Cordall, Simon Speakman. “How Syria’s Assad Helped Forge ISIS.” Newsweek, June 21, 2014. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Abid-Habib, Maria. “Assad Policies Aided Rise of Islamic State Militant Group.” The Wall

Street Journal, August 21, 2014. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

¹⁴ “PRISM,” Vol. 4, Syria Supplement 2014. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

¹⁵ “The U.S. and Assad: Now in a State of ‘Uncoordinated Deconfliction’, by Patrick Brennan, National Review.” National Review Online. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)

¹⁶ “Obama Sent ‘Secret Letter’ to Iran.” BBC News. (Accessed March 18, 2015.)