

Transcript

How regional and international factors impact the Syrian conflict

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Ghayth Armanazi: Thank you for, Fawaz. As you mentioned in your introductory remarks, the effect and influence of the outside, if you want to call it the outside, is largely absent from this workshop and a hole in the deliberations which I'm hoping to plug with all modesty. But I don't think I'll be giving it the want it deserves in terms of the attention and the focus required because it affects much of what is going wrong inside Syria has to do also with the impact and influence of the outside.

I could start by saying that Syria is the country where the Arab Spring came into direct collision with the reality of global and regional geopolitics and it began the Arab Spring with much hope, so much anticipation. People like me and others saw a new dawn for the whole of the Arab world after decades when we were really depressed and I had lost hope in the power of the Arab street, in the power of public opinion. I remember speaking with officials in the west all the time and whenever I wanted to defend our position of the Arabs, I would say well there's Arab public opinion. They say, "What Arab public opinion? What Arabs are you talking about?" was easily dismissed and the Arab Spring gave rise to a new hope of a new dawn of a new landscape in the region. But that Arab Spring, I'm afraid to say, as I said, come to collision in Syria itself had become the area, the battle ground and where this collision between the Arab Spring and global and regional geopolitics was locked in battle.

This reality was recognized early on by the Syrian regime and constituted its main line of counter attack as it confronted the beginnings of the uprising in Syria itself. The leadership in Syria realised that one way of addressing this uprising was to set it squarely within the context of the outside and how it is being governed by these forces that we need to resist. Ironically -- and that's why we spoke of the conspiracy and everything else around, a global conspiracy, in fact, a universal conspiracy was some of the language being used -- those at the head of the international conspiracy as seen from Damascus were very slow to embrace the role assigned to them by the Syrian president himself. For several weeks indeed, a few months following the uprising the message to Assad from most of the capitals in the world was, "We are happy to tolerate or even back you if you take the right course and lead the change." This was in contrast to how Mubarak was being treated or how Ben Ali was treated after two weeks of course. With Bashar Assad there was a readiness to give time and the opportunity for himself to lead the change within the country. It took some time before this policy and this attitude developed into something completely different.

So there was this window of opportunity for Bashar Assad either to respond or to ignore these calls, but he decided that these calls were indeed silent calls as far as he was concerned. He calculated that to implement real change would sound the death knell of the regime. And he was advised I think that the lessons to be drawn from Tunisia, from Egypt, even from Libya was that if you respond in any positive way to the demands of the uprising of the revolution, then you are on a slippery slope to the fate that befell Mubarak and Ben Ali and of course at that time also

Gaddafi that was in the closest of being overthrown. Many people were telling him, "Look what happened Ben Ali, look what happened to Mubarak and what is happening today to Gaddafi. And if you do respond in any significant way to these demands that would be your fate eventually."

Where he made a mistake, I believe and this I'll go back to what Christopher said earlier, was to not to recognize the difference between him and within Syria and the sort of popularity he still had within Syria as contrasted with Mubarak happened in Egypt and Ben Ali and so forth. He had a constituency. He had a base from which if he had taken the steps, I believe, I believe, he could have overcome and he could have really led the reforms as what he was being encouraged to do so by those who became later his enemies even in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. So there was that moment when he could have ridden the storm, if he like, because his position, I suggest, was different in terms of the popularity and the base he could have exploited to his advantage but he chose not to do so.

The course he took, in the end, by talking about Syria as becoming the battleground for the conspiracy versus those who were in the resistance and the *momana'a*, as you call it, because he decided that this was the battleground, this was the real confrontation that is taking shape in this country. -- at least that was the message he was giving out as forcefully as possible to his propaganda machine that was quite effectively doing that -- he also wanted to project the menace initially of what could happen should his regime fall, what could happen in terms of was going to be the party or the forces that could then take over far. And in a sense, that was a self-fulfilling prophecy which we've seen actually emerge in time. He said we were facing Salafis, we're facing this and that. At the beginning it wasn't the case at all. In an ironic twist of fate, if you like, and destiny, this is what we are seeing today, in a sense, again it's a self-fulfilling prophecy that he is probably more comfortable with today than he was at the beginning of the uprising. He could always say, "Look, I told you so. This is what we are facing. This is what we are confronting," and to some extent, defense and development in the region of giving credence to that approach. And battle lines were drawn in Turkey, the Gulf, the west, America on the one hand and, of course, the Gulf, Qatar Saudi Arabia in particular, Russia and China.

These are the two parties, the two alliances that we are facing in Syria today, who are actually in confrontation and trying to get, they are the stakeholders in what is happening in Syria today and in Syria's future if you like, but both groups of supporters, whether we talk about the supporters or the opposition in this many forms, all those who stand by the regime of Bashar al-Assad are not working for the interest of the Syrian people, I'm afraid. They are giving both the protagonists the kind of illusion about how they might emerge victorious from this conflict that has played into the hands of those who want to continue to fight to the finish because we are supported or we have this support or that support. To some extent, those who

are telling, for example, the single opposition, “Bashar’s days are numbered we don’t recognize him. Look we are on your side,” but at the same time leaving them to struggle on their own, leaving them to fight on their own; giving them the hope and the illusion that they will emerge victorious, but at the same time sitting back and just watching events in Syria. This is basically what is happening and a lot of these Syrians who are now involved in the civil war already know and are feeling what they sense is a kind of betrayal from those who want to fight, but want to fight without themselves getting involved, to the last drop of Syrian blood.

At the same time those powers, like Iran, like Russia and to some extent China as well are telling Bashar or giving the message to Bashar, at least the illusion to Bashar, that we are with you to the bitter end so you can depend on us whatever you do and that is giving him also the opportunity to carry on the fight and to use whatever means possible at his disposal, to crush the revolution in the way he thought he could do easily at the beginning, but he found out it’s not going to be as easy as all that. This is the catastrophe that is facing Syria today. This is where nobody can see from the position we are in today an easy outcome or outcome that is coming at any time soon.

There was the hope at some stage this global involvement, if you are likely in the Syrian crisis, could have taken a different course. There could have been some kind of grand bargain between the west and Russia, for example, and there were attempts and there were hopes that this grand bargain could happen. That we, the west, would do what we can with the opposition. You, the Russians, do what you can with Syria or with the Syrian regime and let’s see if we can achieve some kind of solution, some kind of resolution that would spare the Syrian people and I’m talking about the Syrian people -- families, children, cities being spared that outcome. But this never happened and when there was a moment, for example, a brief moment when some of us thought yes, maybe they can come to that agreement and we had the Geneva Agreement, back on the 30 June when Russia seemed to accept finally that there has to be a transition, there has to be a move to a new government in Syria, a transition. But the day after that agreement was announced to the world, it seemed that some, especially the western interpretation of this agreement, put Russia on the spot and that, in a sense, aborted what could have been the basis for a change, a proper compromise, a proper settlement.

But that never happened and we see today still hopes being raised or not really raised, but motions going through about Al-Ibrahimi and before that Kofi Annan and so forth. But if you talk to experts, if you talk to those who are really are on the know, you will find very few voices of optimism in respect to what could happen in the near future. There is, of course, talk all the time of are we going to be pushed into

intervention, especially in the western media in western capitals, what could happen. What is happening every day is more and more blood being shed and more and more hopes being dashed of the kind of international positive impact on the crisis that could spare the worst. I'll leave you with a thought that was declared and announced recently by Michael Clarke of RUSI on the subject of intervention. "We are not moving toward intervention," he said, "but intervention is certainly moving towards us." Whether this would happen soon or later, I don't know but it's an open question which I leave in your minds. Thank you very much.