

Can the World Afford to Condone the 'Divided States of Syria'?

Hassan Mneimneh

After more than three years of corrosive wars, Syria no longer exists as a nation-state. It has been replaced by disparate entities and precarious arrangements – to the detriment of the Syrian population. The 'Divided States of Syria' are in large part the result of the survival strategy of the regime, aided by the futile pursuit of a 'political solution' by the international community. As the tragedy deepens, the recovery of Syria becomes more difficult, and the implications for regional stability increase in gravity. The West – the United States in particular – has abstained from forceful engagement. Yet, the price to pay today may in retrospect pale in light of the political, strategic and moral catastrophes that the current reserved approach is enabling.

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For more than three years, amidst *de facto* global indifference and proclamations of incapacity, Syria has been freefalling into the lethal, the obscene and the absurd. It may be impossible to measure the toll this festering conflict will have imposed on the country and beyond in human and development terms. It is however evident that the extent of the catastrophe is unequalled in the region, even when compared to the death and destruction that has been inflicted (and self-inflicted) on neighbouring Iraq. While the regime, its apologists and those in need of justifying inaction indulge in a quasi-fatalistic narrative of initial legitimate demands hijacked by extremists, and thus agree on the current imperative of defeating the bigger of the two evils – violent radicalism in its several local incarnations – Syrian communities have suffered an effective genocide, whether by physical liquidation or through forced displacement and the obliteration of their means of sustenance and continuity. Still, the international conversation is about a diplomatic solution and a political process, both futile at inception. A realistic assessment of Syria's prospects requires a clear understanding of the topographic and socio-political configuration that has replaced the once nation-state of Syria.

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A map of the 'Divided States of Syria'

The Syrian Arab Republic, with the common endonym of *Suriya al-Assad* (the Syria of Assad), continues to entertain the fiction of territorial integrity and sovereignty over the totality of Syria. Its effective control does not exceed a small fraction of it, albeit with the ability to deny its enemies control over additional swaths of territory. *Suriya al-Assad* oversees four types of territories.

The first type consists mainly of the Mediterranean littoral and the adjacent mountain range with an Alawi majority population. The Alawis constitute the Syrian regime's second stratum, with a pronounced over-representation in the armed forces, state and security apparatuses. Prior to the current conflict, the Syrian regime was neither all-inclusive of the Alawi community nor limited to it. The polemical reference to the Assad government as the Alawi regime ignored both the substantial opposition to the Assad family within the Alawi community, and the considerable alliances that this ruling family had forged with non-Alawi actors, in particular the urban Sunni bourgeoisie of Damascus and other major cities. However, since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, calculated measures by the regime, as well as deficiencies and strategic errors on the part of the opposition have further entrapped the Alawi community in Assad's grip. Proportional to its size, the Alawi community may have suffered the most casualties since the beginnings of hostilities, given the growing contingents of young Alawi recruits dispatched by the regime for its battles (and rewarded with a free hand at disposing of population and property in defeated enemy towns). Inter-communal animosity has thus risen to unprecedented levels. In a region dominated by collective identities, it is difficult to conceive of a near future capable of transcending the widening rift between Alawi and Sunni Syrians. In this first type of territory, the regime is widely accepted and supported, often as a necessary measure against the massacres that the Alawi community anticipates were the regime to fall. It is the regime's hinterland.

The regime also controls the main national corridor, the south-north string of cities from Damascus to Aleppo, through Homs and Hama, and adjoining towns and agglomerations. This second type of territory is effectively occupied land, with expelled, defeated and co-opted populations. It is the brute force of the regime, the depth of its informant networks, and the direct support of its foreign allies that safeguard its grip over these areas, often reduced to rubble, with the population decimated. While the regime seems engaged in drastic measures to consolidate its power over this territory, its stranglehold over much of the region is likely to prove extremely costly, and untenable in the mid- to long term.

Across this 'occupied land', the heavy hand of the regime is lifted from select areas that have demonstrated a vassal status, even while striving to exempt their population from an escalated involvement in the regime's war. The main such 'vassal area' is the Druze majority region in the south. Others include disparate

Christian villages and neighbourhoods. The loyalty of these areas to the regime is understood by all concerned as fluctuating from the tactical to the strategic as a function of the success of the opposition in excluding radical elements, a task yet to be fulfilled.

In addition to 'hinterland', 'occupied land' and 'vassal areas', the regime maintains control over numerous outposts in diverse areas of Syria. Often isolated and supplied through drop shipments from the air, these outposts are primarily military in nature, with the notable exceptions of besieged minority towns, aligned with the regime through its success in redefining the conflict for its minority audience as one against a tyrannical Sunni majority. These outposts serve multiple military and political goals: they disproportionately neutralise opposition forces stationed for their siege, serve to deny some accusations against the regime that it is retreating to an Alawi homeland, while subtly confirming the status of the regime as defender of minorities. Yet, it is evident that many of these outposts are dispensable. The current shift in the balance of power in favour of the regime has enabled it to maintain control over most of them. It is however likely to abandon many in case of reversal.

In a manoeuvre intended to dispel the potential growth of the opposition camp, in 2011 the regime ceded effective control over the Kurdish majority areas in Northern Syria to local forces led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK is the terrorist faction active in Turkey. While tactical considerations in the past had resulted at times in a utilitarian alliance between the regime and the PKK, the regime's policy towards its own Kurdish population was one of repression, denial of cultural rights, and even a withholding of citizenship. Anti-uprising considerations changed the equation, with the previously chauvinistic regime now surrendering to all Kurdish demands, with the hope of avoiding their participation in the opposition. The regime's manoeuvre succeeded. Thus was born 'Western Kurdistan', named in conformity with the Kurdish nationalistic nomenclature (Northern Kurdistan being in Turkey, Southern Kurdistan in Iraq, and Eastern Kurdistan in Iran). With a large area in the Syrian northeastern panhandle serving as its core, Western Kurdistan extends to an archipelago of towns and villages parallel to the Turkish border. The proven determination of Kurdish fighters to defend their brethren in these towns has fostered a complex set of arrangements with other local forces, providing Western Kurdistan with a relatively centralised power structure in spite of its geographic fragmentation. The adjacency of Iraqi Kurdistan, and its growing influence in Western Kurdistan has allowed the importation of expedited 'kurdification' measures – in education, media and culture – while also serving as a moderating influence balancing the radical outlook sponsored by the PKK. Western Kurdistan has largely succeeded in avoiding the effects of the Syrian wars, and is consolidating as a national entity set on its own course.

Through the documented targeted slaughter of the total civilian population of many Sunni towns and villages, and through deliberately provocative desecration of Sunni mosques and symbols, the regime sought to enflame Sunni sectarian rhetoric, thus justifying its brutal measures as necessary tools in a fight against Sunni radicalism. This strategy was partially successful. It was however bolstered by the regime's release from its prisons of hundreds of veteran radical jihadist militants to join the ranks of the extremist fringe of the opposition. This fringe, both through its own resources and through the facilitation provided by the regime, emerged as a third force in the battle between regime and opposition. While in principle opposed to the regime, much of the fighting power of this fringe, which metastasized into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (*Da'ish*), is dedicated to fighting the opposition. As such, the regime can claim success in another tactical manoeuvre. The national price of the action is however incalculable. *Da'ish* has imposed its rule on a considerable fraction of Syria. From the eastern border with Iraq, along the Euphrates valley, and up to the Turkish border, *Da'ish*, which accuses al-Qaida of laxness in the implementation of radical religious regimentation, has endeavoured to create a social and judiciary order in line with its precepts. Decapitations, crucifixions, amputations and countless other acts of depravity have thus become a regular occurrence in a homicidal dystopic order overseen by foreign 'jurisprudents' in a de facto truce with regime forces. The net result, in addition to the massive destruction and plunder inflicted on the region, is the depletion of its non-Sunni and non-tribal population, with many of the tribes reduced to forced vassality to the radical quasi-state.

The *Da'ish* proclamations of absolute determination to annihilate it notwithstanding, the regime seems little concerned by the spread of lethal radical rule to an estimated quarter of Syria's area. Instead, it identifies the 'unincorporated Free Syrian Army territories', under the actual control of the many factions of the nationally and Islamically inclined opposition as the existential threat. In both the Syrian northwest and southwest, in densely populated areas, formations nominally affiliated with the Free Syrian Army have carved out areas of authority. Some of these factions carry out bona fide opposition activity, others have found in external sponsorship the means for influence and wealth, with others again being thinly camouflaged networks for contraband and other illicit activities. Yet, underneath chaotic warlordism, efforts at communal organisation and mutual support provide some of the few positive experiments that can serve as a basis for the future of Syria.

Can Syria be restored?

The divided states of Syria are a direct product of the regime's strategy to hold back the uprising. The protests that challenged the regime starting in March 2011 were peaceful, inclusive of all Syrian communities, and thus constituted a terminal

threat to an order based on fear and divisions. The regime was solemnly successful in implementing its survival strategy. It has survived and may yet live for a number of years. The collateral damage of its strategy, however, is the end of Syria itself.

Psy and info ops provided courtesy of its Russian, Iranian and Hizbullah allies notwithstanding, the regime's strategy has not been incidental, and has not been camouflaged. The 'Friends of Syria' have lacked the vision and leadership to confront the regime and have been willing to engage it on the basis of rules suitable for its strategy. The regime was in need of time for the subversive and corrosive effects of the processes it fostered to take root. The absurd quest for a political solution, while the destructive machine of the regime is hard at work obliterating Syrian society, may require a harsher assessment of a world order that has negated and obviated in Syria the principle of 'responsibility to protect'. This, however, is a task for a later phase. The question to address today is whether Syria can be restored, as a national community, as a nation-state, as an identity. The immediate answer seems to be a sad 'no'.

The tragedy of Syria today is that, while the processes of disintegration set to provide the regime with a new lease on life continue, efforts at justifying inaction in some world capitals are taking solace on the 'win' that results from the mortal combat between two enemies of the West. US President Barack Obama himself characterized the crisis in Syria as one that depletes Iranian resources while consuming Al Qaida. The West, according to its most prominent leader, is thus seemingly the victor in the Syrian war. The fact that, rather than being the burial ground of the jihadism of today, Syria is the incubator of tomorrow's new generation of jihadists, who will naturally span across the world and potentially seed countless tragedies, seems to have slipped through this analysis. As has, lamentably, the fact that innocent Syrians are in the crossfire, when not the direct target, of the two breeds of enemies.

The current do-nothing approach, even when presented as the pursuit of a political solution, will eventually result in continuing tragedies up until and well after the regime falls. Syria may be the 21st century Afghanistan, with regional and global implications. Even if forceful action is applied today, eradicating the regime and initiating a process of re-integration, recognition of the de facto autonomy of Western Kurdistan would be necessary, as well as a long-term regional special status for the regime's 'hinterland'. National reconstitution would require a gradual approach with a focus on the re-integration of the main demographic and economic corridor, from the Jordanian to the Turkish borders through the main agglomerations, with tailored policies of repopulation over all of Syria. There is no lack of Syrian intellectual might to lead the shaping of the project. This project is, however, today a mere illusion.

Rather than anticipating an international solution, Syria is living the fourth year of its new tragic reality. Its citizens have traded the subsistence and humiliation

which were their daily bread under autocracy prior to the war, for a horror of apocalyptic scale – barrel bombs cascading on residential neighbourhoods, death squads slaughtering whole families, and foreigners with eschatological ambitions fighting for and against a regime in its quest to survive, at the price of the obliteration of the nation.

Even if the regime were Alawi, as it is so often accused of being by its enemies, retreating to its hinterland is not an option in light of the calamity it has brought upon the Alawi population. The strategy of destruction adopted by the regime has annihilated the infrastructure, both physical and systemic, for the restoration of order in the country under its control. The regime's strategy is to destroy Syria for its survival; it can only renew its lease on life in a destroyed Syria. Syria can only be restored, gradually and incrementally, if the regime is removed. With the hesitant and often conflicting support it receives, the fractured opposition has no chance of realising such a goal while the regime enjoys the firm and steady support of its allies.

In 2011, the West, with its Middle Eastern allies, had the option, at a relatively low cost, of supporting the Syrian opposition when it was forced to militarize, empowering it to unite, organise, and act productively to liberate Syria from its torturer. It did not exercise that option. It is faced today with the new option of a far more complex set of conditions, and at a far more exorbitant cost, to act towards the same goal. Its other option is to condone the divided states of Syria and their regional and global spillover. The former choice, if not selected, will certainly be revisited in the near future as having been a missed opportunity to avoid tragedies that can visibly be anticipated. Previous considerations notwithstanding, the United States remains the sole power capable of synchronizing allies and partners to realise the convergence of values and interests on the path to restoring Syria. While other crises, domestic and foreign, may occupy much of the attention of the US public and leadership, the Syrian tragedy has endured too long and ought to be viewed for what it is: today's Rwanda, in a world that was promised "never again".