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Syria

What peace process in Syria?

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The negotiation process between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition of the National Coalition was still stalled at the end of May 2016, despite statements of representatives of Russia and the United States in early May to redouble their efforts to achieve a political settlement of the Syrian conflict and extend the cease-fire on all Syrian territory. No date has even been set for new indirect talks in Geneva between the regime and the opposition. Three indirect rounds of talks have been held since the beginning of the year in Geneva without progress. The last round in April was suspended with the resumption of hostilities in Aleppo. The temporary truce in Aleppo announced Thursday, May 5, was violated on Sunday May 23rd 2016 following Russian air strikes hit the only road into occupation held areas of Aleppo city in the heaviest bombing since February.

'Children not soldiers'

The Assad regime and its allies of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah continue its attacks and deadly and daily bombings against civilians and civilian infrastructure in areas outside its control throughout the country. This of course is done with the complicity of other world powers. At the same time, the Islamic fundamentalist forces excluded by the ceasefire on their side also committed crimes as in the death of over 140 people, Monday, May 23 in the explosion of seven car bombs in two coastal towns in western Syria, Tartus and Jable, the attack was claimed by Daech, or the sectarian massacre by Islamist groups led by Jabhat al-Nusra (branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria) in which at least 19 civilians were killed against the village of Zara, in the central province of Hama.

The UN mediator, Staffan de Mistura said "inter-syrians talks will be credible when the cessation of hostilities will be credible and when credible progress has been made on the humanitarian front." The peace roadmap for Syria drafted late 2015 in Vienna conference by the International Support Group for Syria (ISGS)- a group of 17 countries and 3 international organizations – including the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the European Union, has completely failed. This is despite the fact this draft peace agreement was voted in December by a resolution of the UN Security Council. The date of August 1st, 2016, for the establishment of a transitional authority, as stipulated in the UN resolution of December 2015, is also no longer on the agenda. The only possible outcome, which has yet to be verified on the field, of the meeting in Vienna in mid May of ISGS could be airdrops of humanitarian aid by the World Food Programme from June 1st to besieged areas still inaccessible by road. But this would be only in "last resort", as acknowledged in New York by a UN spokesman, while recalling the difficulties of airdrops as being inaccurate and expensive. It also needs the agreement of Damascus and Moscow. So far, these drops have occurred in April 2016, only to support the enclave held by the regime in Deir ez-Zor in the east, surrounded by Daech.

Moscow and Washington, which co-chair the International Support Group for Syria (ISGS) run and try to monitor the cease-fire, initiated under their impulse in February 27 and partly fulfilled for some time but without stopping hostilities completely, particularly with major violations such as between April 22 and May 5 in Aleppo killing several hundred persons. That said, the partial cease-fire had allowed the revival of massive popular protests across the liberated areas of Syria for several weeks. The importance of the cease-fire and stopping military fights are essential to democratic forces in Syria to allow them to operate, demonstrate and organize their local communities, while the Islamic Fundamentalist forces benefit firstly from the continuation of the war to increase their influence in the liberated areas of the regime.

Also thanks to the partial cease-fire, 250,000 people have been sent basic supplies throughout Syria, out of a total of 410,000 persons living in besieged areas. However the regime still prevented the delivery of aid to Daraya which has been under siege for several years now. Four trucks containing surgical kits, medicines, vaccines, but no food, and baby milk were firstly authorized but were eventually not delivered. According to a humanitarian source, the 4th Armoured Division, the elite unit deployed around Damascus, demanded that in order to let through the trucks, that they empty all their cargo, with the exception of vaccines. Following this order, the organizers decided to go back. Few minutes later, nine artillery shells fell on the spot where the people of Daraya gathered awaiting the convoy. A father and his son were killed in the explosions.

The Assad regime and its allies are actually the key players in the continuation of the war against the Syrian people by its perpetual and daily bombings, blockades and other forms of repression. These are the main reason for the failure of the peace negotiations. This of course is done with the complicity of other world powers as I will show.

A statement by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) on May 23rd signed by nearly 40 rebel groups that operate across Syria actually said they would deem the cessation of hostilities deal as having “totally collapsed” if the assault by Syrian regime and allied Lebanese Hezbollah forces fighters did not cease within two days on their positions in the suburbs of Damascus. They also mentioned other areas of the country such as Aleppo and Idlib.

Russia, Iran and Hezbollah

As we have discussed previously in an earlier article, the official announcement of the so called withdrawal of the main Russian military forces in Syria by President Putin on March 14 has not yet prevented the continuation of the bombing campaign by Moscow’s military air forces in several regions of the country, in particular to support the army of the Assad regime, and the maintenance of Russian troops in some military bases. Deliveries of weapons and equipment are continuing a steady pace in Tartous. The container port is always reserved for Russian ships and shipping agencies must rely on Latakia. On Syrian soil, Putin also maintains helicopters, artillery pieces, long-range rocket batteries and most of the 5,000 Russian military personnel. This is not to mention the recovery of city Palmyra by the “Syrian army” and its allies, and especially heavily supported by Russia in the air by its airstrikes and on the ground with the participation of Russian commandos. All this demonstrates that Putin’s announcement was not serious.

The announcement of Russian military withdrawal came mainly as a diplomatic gesture before the new round of “peace negotiations,” which resumed in Geneva in mid-March with the participation of representatives of the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition of the Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (known as the Etilaf in arabic).

In addition to all of this, tens of thousands of Iranian Hezbollah and Shi’a fundamentalist militia soldiers also continue to fight on the side of the regime forces. The Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah also said in the wake of the death of the top Hezbollah military commander Mustafa Badreddine few weeks ago that the party would increase its number of soldiers in Syria to assist the Assad regime.

The United States and Western states

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Friday, May 20 that Russia proposed to the United States and the international coalition led by Washington to carry out air strikes together from May 25 against terrorist groups active

in Syria and illegal armed groups who do not support the cease-fire established in Syria.

Washington rejected the offer, saying the US will not cooperate with the Russians on military operations in Syria. Communication between the United States and the Russian military in Syria is limited to contacts to avoid accidents because they lead rival bombing campaigns and a small number of US forces operates on the ground, especially in the regions controlled by the PYD. The Russian operations consist indeed to sustain and support the Assad regime and the United States focuses only on the defeat of the Islamic State group, as stated by the US Secretary of State John Kerry. It nevertheless stated that the US government was discussing with Russian counterparts proposals for a sustainable mechanism to better monitor and enforce the lull in the fighting in Syria.

The priority of the US and European states is indeed to end the presence and activities of Daech in Syria and Iraq. The international coalition commanded by the United States has also dropped leaflets calling for the first time the people of Raqqa to leave the town occupied by Daech on Friday, May 20. "This is not the first time that coalition aircraft been dropped leaflets over Raqqa but this is the first time they ask residents to leave," said Abu Mohammad, a founder of the group "Raqqa is Being slaughtered silently" ("Raqqa is slaughtered in silence"). According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (OSDH), about 408 civilians were killed by air strikes from the coalition led by Washington in Syria since the start in 2014 of the bombing operations against jihadist positions.

It is in this framework that we have to understand the visit of Joseph Votel, a four-star US army general and head of Central Command, the highest-ranking U.S. military official to visit Syria since the uprising erupted in 2011, to the training camps of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), dominated by the military branch of the PYD and that has become the main instrument on the ground in Syria for the USA to fight Daech, as the group and its US coalition allies prepare recruits for operations against Daech in northern province of Raqqa. Aided by U.S.-led air strikes, the SDF has driven Daech from wide areas of northern Syria over the last year or more, though its advances have recently slowed.

No regime change in Syria is promoted by the USA and its European allies, quite on the opposite. Their main enemy in their perspective is Daech.

The failure of the peace process

The reasons underlying the failure of the peace process are because of the desire of the Assad regime and its allies of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah to end all forms of opposition in the country. The United States and the Western states on their side consider the main enemies organizations as Daech and Jabhat al-Nusra. This is why they support a form of political transition without any radical change in which the structure of the regime is maintained in order to end the activities and the presence of Daech and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

The departure of the dictator Assad is indeed no more a precondition as it was evident during the last rounds of negotiations, or even a change of structures of the authoritarian regime, including its security forces, is on the agenda. In March, the UN mediator, S. de Mistura, has also recalled that "the agenda of the process (of peace) is clear: first negotiations for a new government secondly a new Constitution, and thirdly, parliamentary and presidential elections within 18 months." This so called realpolitik and the failure of peace negotiations strengthen on the ground in Syria Islamic fundamentalist forces that continue to denounce these peace negotiations promoted by the "crusaders" and "infidel" forces as a way to save and maintain the regime of Assad. This is not far from the reality actually as we have seen and this discourse has some resonance on the ground in some sections of the population, particularly in the zones most affected by bombing and repression of the regime.

What peace process in Syria?

Daech and Jabhat al-Nusra feed on authoritarian regimes and their murderous repressions, their neo-liberal and sectarian policies, as well as from the support they get from imperialist and sub imperialist countries. The necessity is to get rid of the conditions that allow fundamentalist groups to develop and expand and this means empowering the people on the ground to overthrow authoritarian regime and face reactionary groups.

Despite their rivalry, the imperialist and sub-imperialist actors share a common goal: to liquidate the revolutionary movement initiated in March 2011, stabilize the regime in Damascus, with its dictator remaining at its head (for a short and medium term in any case) and try to militarily defeat Daech. It is also for this reason that the United States did and does not oppose vehemently the massive Russian military intervention since September 2015, which continues until today or the continuation of offensives by the Assad regime and its allies. Besides, the Syrian opposition have repeatedly complained of the pressures exerted by the United States to force them to negotiate with representatives of the Assad regime, despite repeated violations of the ceasefire by regime forces, the continuation of the blockades on besieged cities, the refusal to release political prisoners as requested by the resolution of the United Nations voted in December 2015. This pressure was symbolized by the words of US Secretary of State John Kerry to Syrian humanitarian workers outside the London donor conference "Supporting Syria", in January 2016, saying the Syrian opposition will be decimated and had to expect 3 months of bombing. Kerry had also blamed the Syrian opposition for leaving the talks in Geneva III conference, which opened the way for a joint offensive by the Syrian regime and Russia on Aleppo.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey for their part have not offered to compromise until now, on the question of the dictator Assad and they want as quickly as possible his departure of power, but that does not mean they want a radical regime change in the direction of the popular aspirations of the Syrian people for democracy, social justice and equality, on the contrary. These states want to maintain the authoritarian structure of the regime with a sectarian character and even more conservative in alliance with the Salafist jihadist movements like Ahrar Sham and the Army of Islam, which would continue their fight against Daech; promote neoliberal policies and limit as much as possible social rights, and prevent any form of Kurdish autonomy, while maintaining the imperialist order in the region. This can be seen by the leaders of the opposition negotiation team formed in Riyadh in December 2015, supported by these states: at its head the former Prime Minister and Ba'athist Riad Hijab, the chairman of the High Committee of the Syrian negotiations, Mohamed Alloush, chief negotiator for the opposition delegation and politburo member of the Salafist jihadist group Army of Islam, and the former Syrian army General, Assaad al-Zoabi, head of the delegation.

Another reason for the failure of the peace process is also related to the continuation of the popular resistance despite the bombing, blockades, and repression, which refuses the diktat of international powers to maintain the regime and the dictator Assad and opposes as well the authoritarian practices of Islamic fundamentalist forces.

In addition to the continuation of demonstrations and protests mentioned in the previous articles such as in Sweida against the Assad regime and in Maaret al-Numaan against Jabhat al-Nusra, new protests have occurred in different cities of the Idlib province against the authoritarian practices of Jabhat Al-Nusra. In the city of Kafr Nabl, the demonstrators during the weekend of May 19-21 demanded military factions not to interfere in civilian affairs and management of the council. They also demanded the release of several activists and members of the former local council in the prisons of Jabhat al-Nusra, while in the city of Saraqeb protesters demonstrated following the murder of an activist by Jabhat al-Nusra.

In the Idlib province, a campaign was launched called "Children Not Soldiers" by activists of the region to counter the campaign of recruitment called "Go Forth," which aimed at recruiting 3,000 child and teenage soldiers, largely across Idlib and Aleppo provinces. This campaign was launched by Salafi cleric and vocal Al-Qaeda advocate the Saudi sheikh Abdallah al-Muhaysini who serves as both chairman of the Jihad's Callers Center, a training institute for religious leaders in collaboration with Jabhat a-Nusra, and is a senior judge in the Victory Army. The anti-recruitment campaign holds meetings in secret and late at night to avoid being discovered by the ruling Victory Army, dominated by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar Sham.

What peace process in Syria?

Many other examples of democratic popular resistance can be found across liberated Syria in the spirit of the objectives of the revolution, especially promoted and maintained by the local popular councils and groups of activists that are the pulse of this movement.

The end of the war is essential and is a priority, but it can not really be possible without taking into account the popular aspirations of the Syrian people fighting for freedom and dignity. This means that any peace process must allow the establishment of a transition without Assad and his running mates at the head of the state, and for a Syria that is democratic, social, secular and without any kind of discriminations regarding gender, religion, ethnicity, etc . It also needs to take into account and support the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria, totally ignored and even refused by the Assad regime and the National Coalition supported by the West, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies.

We need to be in solidarity with the Syrian people in their fight against the diktats of the imperialist and sub-powers, against the Assad regime and its allies, and all the various actors of the counter-revolution trying to crush it.

We must crush all the tyrants as written recently on a placard by demonstrators in the city of Maaret al-Numaan.

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