

The West's Greatest Fear

Western attempts to destroy Syria have not been going to plan, revealing that what the West fears most is a peaceful resolution to the crisis

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The strategy was simple, clear, tried and tested. It had been used successfully not only against Libya, but also Kosovo (in 1999), and was rapidly underway in Syria. It was to run as follows: train proxies to launch armed provocations; label the state's response to these provocations as genocide; intimidate the UN Security Council into agreeing that "something must be done"; incinerate the army and any other resistance with fragmentation bombs and Hellfire missiles; and finally install a weak, compliant government to sign off new contracts and alliances drawn up in London, Paris and Washington, whilst the country tore itself apart.

Result: the heart torn out of the "axis of resistance" between Iran, Syria and Hizbullah, leaving Iran isolated and the West with a free hand to attack Iran without fear of regional repercussions.

This was to be Syria's fate, drawn up years ago in the high-level planning committees of US, British and French defence departments and intelligence services. But this time, unlike in Libya, it has not all gone according to plan.

First, there was Russia and China's veto of the "regime change" resolution at the UN Security Council in October 2011, followed by a second veto in February of this year. This meant that any NATO attack on Syria would be denied the figleaf of UN approval, and seen instead as a unilateral act of aggression not just against Syria, but potentially also against China and Russia as well.

Vicious and reckless as they are, even Cameron, Sarkozy and Obama do not necessarily have the stomach for that kind of a fight. That left the burden of destroying the Syrian state to NATO's proxy forces on the ground, the "Free Syrian Army" - a collection of domestic and (increasingly) foreign militias, mostly ultra-sectarian Salafi extremists, along with a smattering of defectors and Western special forces.

However, this army was not created actually to defeat the Syrian state; that was always supposed to be NATO's job. As in Libya, the role of the militias was simply to provoke reprisals from the state in order to justify a NATO blitzkrieg. Left to their own devices, they have no chance of gaining power militarily, as many in the opposition realise.

"We don't believe the Free Syrian Army is a project that can help the Syrian revolution," said leader of the internal Syrian resistance movement Haitham Al-Manna, recently. "We don't have an example of where an armed struggle against a dictatorial regime has won." Of course, one could cite Cuba, South Vietnam, and many others, but what is certainly true is that internal armed struggle alone has never succeeded when the government is the only party in the struggle with any significant mass support, as is the case in Syria.

This reality was brutally driven home in early March in the decisive battle for the Baba Amr district of Homs. This was supposedly one of the Free Syrian Army's strongholds, yet they were roundly defeated, leaving them facing the prospect of similar defeats in their last few remaining territories as well. The opposition groups are becoming increasingly aware that their best chance of meaningful change is not through a military fight that they will almost certainly lose, and which will get them killed in the process, along with their losing their support and credibility, but through negotiations and participation in the reform process and the dialogue that the government has offered.

This prospect - of an end to the civil war and a negotiated peace that brings about a reform process without destabilising the country - has led to desperation amongst the imperialist powers. Despite their claims to the contrary, a stable Syrian-led process is the last thing they want, as it leaves open the possibility of Syria remaining a strong, independent, anti-imperialist state - exactly the possibility they had sought to eliminate.

Hence, within days of Kofi Anan's peace plan gaining a positive response from both sides in late March, the imperialist powers openly pledged, for the first time, millions of dollars for the Free Syrian Army: for military equipment, to provide salaries to its soldiers, and to bribe government forces to defect. In other words, terrified that the civil war in Syria is starting to die down, they are setting about institutionalising it. If violent regime change is starting to look unlikely, the hope instead is to keep the country weak and on its knees by sucking its energy into an ongoing civil war.

At the risk of making the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) appear even more out of touch with ordinary Syrians than it does already, its Western backers have increased the pressure on it to fall into line with this strategy, leading to open calls from the SNC leadership for both the full-scale arming of the rebellion and for aerial bombardment from the West.

This has caused huge rifts in the organisation, with three leading members defecting last month, because they did not want to be "accomplices in the massacre of the Syrian people through delaying, cheating, lies, one-upmanship and monopolisation of decision-making." The SNC, according to one of the three, Kamal Al-Labwani, is "linked to foreign agendas that aim to prolong the battle while waiting... for the country to be dragged into a civil war."

Last month, one of the few SNC leaders actually based in Syria, Riad Turk, called on the opposition to accept the Anan peace plan, "stop the bloodshed" and enter into dialogue with the government -- a call not echoed by his fellow SNC colleagues abroad. Likewise, the main peaceful opposition grouping within Syria -- the National Coordinating Committee -- has fallen out with the SNC over the latter's increasingly belligerent role as a mouthpiece of foreign powers.

NCC leader Al-Manna spoke out against the Free Syrian Army recently, saying "the militarisation of the Syrian revolution signifies the death of the internal revolution...We know that the Turkish government is playing an important role in the political decisions of the Free Syrian Army. We don't

believe that an armed group can be on Turkish territory and remain independent of Turkish decisions."

So, there is a growing perception, even amongst the Syrian opposition movement itself, that both the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council are working in the interests of foreign powers to prolong a pointless civil war.

Western policy-makers are playing a dangerous game. Short of a NATO attack, their best option for the destabilisation and emasculation of Syria is to ensure that the ceasefire fails and the fighting continues. To this end, they are encouraging their proxy militias to step up their provocations: the purpose of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statements about "other measures" still being on the table is to keep the idea of a NATO attack alive in the heads of the rebels so that they continue to fight.

Indeed, many more foreign fighters have been shipped into the country in recent weeks, according to The Washington Post, and these have been launching devastating bomb attacks in Damascus and Aleppo. US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford is a protégé of John Negroponte, who organised Contra death squads to destabilise Nicaragua in the 1980s; he will almost certainly have been organising similar groups in Syria during his time there last year and for similar purposes. Nevertheless, the destabilisation agenda is not going according to plan. The internal opposition in Syria is becoming increasingly frustrated with the way things are progressing, and a clear split is emerging between those based outside the country, happy to see Syria consigned to oblivion in order to please their paymasters and further their careers, and those who actually have to live with the consequences.

The reckless attacks carried out by the armed militias are increasingly alienating even those who once had some sympathy for them, especially as their foreign membership and direction is being exposed ever more clearly. Having been proven unable to win and hold territory, these militias are turning to hit- and-run guerrilla tactics. But the guerrilla, as Mao put it, is like a fish that can only survive in a sea of popular support. And that sea is rapidly drying up.