

The Right to Protect and the Use of Force and Syria: A contemporary Arabic and Islamic Perspective

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Introduction:

This paper is going to examine the issue of military intervention within the context of the Syrian Crisis and, furthermore, how to respond to the Syrian crisis within a regional context. The use of force by Western states under the international principle of the Right to Protect, R2P, is perceived in the region as internationalizing the Syrian crisis which carries serious implications on the future outcome of the Syrian revolt against the regime dictatorship. The course of the future of Syria would be adversely shaped by consequences if such military campaign carried out, particularly by foreign powers. In the context of traditional Arab and Islamic political culture, the concept of Hizbul Al Fudul, the Alliance of Fudul, functioned as an internal intervention based on consensus that include a military option if necessary.¹ Syria is not an isolated case. The revolt in Syria began as a chain reaction of the larger Arab revolt calling for social justice and freedom. In the early months of 2012, for example, peaceful weekly demonstrations on Fridays simultaneously took place in Syria and Yemen echoed a unified call against authoritarian oppression in both societies.

Thus, it is crucial to understand local and regional opinions expressed by influential scholars, writers and public institutions reflecting regional sentiment and the way to intervene in the Syria. What are the policy recommendations being expressed with regard to the contentious issue of foreign military intervention? The paper will outline policy recommendations based on the regional context of history and tradition in finding a way out of the Syrian crisis.

Implications of military interventions in Iraq and Libya:

The use of force in R2P in the case of Syria is viewed by observers in the

region within the shadow background of two cases of contemporary military interventions in the Arab World; Iraq and Libya. The chief example is Iraq where the use of military force was implemented for a regime change. For many in the region, Iraq has not become the exemplary case of democracy and stability. On the contrary, it is largely viewed as a fragmented country broken up along sectarian lines, disintegrating into violence with no end on sight. In the meanwhile, the controversy concerning military intervention in Libya is quite serious. NATO waged military attacks continuously for several months in Libya with civilian casualties estimated in the tens of thousands of civilians in addition to the devastation of national infrastructure. The political scene remains blurred in Libya with the potential contestation among national rivals and in some cases resorting to violence. Thus, the repetition of another war in Syria is causing high tension in the region and sending genuine sings of alarm.

For the more recent example, the military intervention in Libya has been a highly controversial one. The United States and Britain are been accused of hijacking the popular revolt. The perception is that The U.S and NATO have undermined the democratic aspirations of indigenous political movement that are seen to be capable of displacing the old regime.² NATO has the capabilities of global outreach with millions of troops from approximately sixty countries.³ With warships and warplanes policing the Mediteranian, NATO is poised to consolidate a firm control on the outcome of Libya.⁴

One regional perspective points out to the consequences of foreign military interventions in the recent past. In the case of Iraq, a dictator was replaced by a sectarian dictator. The situation in Afghanistan shows more of a failed state than restoring stability. And in Libya, it is more of a precarious and unpredictable political and security climate.⁵ There are two schools of thoughts which have emerged in the region as far as changing dictatorial regimes is concerned. One is the American school of thought which is manifested in the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. The other school of thought is related to the circumstances of political change in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. According to one opinion leader, the American school of thoughts brought all kinds of devastating military hardware, mercenaries and the fifth column, collaborators, to change dictators. But what are the results? One million killed in Iraq, sixty thousand killed in Afghanistan and thirty thousand killed in Libya.⁶

Implications of Foreign Military Intervention in Syria:

Regional sentiment has opposed Western military intervention in Syria for few reasons. Syria is different from Libya. The Syrian army is well-armed and equipped with sophisticated military hardware. Politically speaking, the internationalization of the conflict would include Russia, Iran and China standing with Syria and Hezbollah against NATO and Israel. Such action would need a UN resolution which is clearly not forthcoming given Russia and China vetoes.⁷ Syria is unpredictable in terms of the cost of foreign intervention which could potentially instigate a civil war. The essence of the Syrian revolution is about a popular revolt by all Syrian people revolting to depose a dictator and establish a free and plural society for all Syrian.

Moreover, there is a growing fear among international players that the Syrian crisis is soon coming to end without establishing foreign constraints on it in order to contain an expected victory. For Israel, Russia and the West, the Assad regime is no longer capable of standing firm against the revolution despite all the support received from Moscow and Tehran. The UN in this regards has been accused as being incapable of acting in full responsibility where the UN was referred to as a “penetrated international organization” for sizing out a space of intervention for the purpose of limiting the revolution and not for saving the people.⁸

One cannot escape the Arab World’s sentiment of linking foreign military intervention and history. The U.S is perceived regionally as looking for ways to intervene in order to contain not only the Syrian revolution but the rest of the Arab Revolt or Spring. That is to obstruct any efforts on the part of the Arab people of realizing unity.⁹ Military intervention is historically linked to European colonization which aimed at “tearing up the Arab Homeland”¹⁰ into pieces and established new cultures of separate “modern” states in order to prevent unity.¹¹

Impact of the Use of Force on the Region

Lebanon is highly vulnerable in many ways to the ongoing conflict. Military intervention under the pretext of Right to Protect would intensify internationalizing the conflict and thus, a spillover would be an imminent fact.

Foreign intervention would impact Syrian society adversely and jeopardize the unity of the country. As Lebanon has experienced the ills of foreign military interventions in the past, trust is a rare commodity when it comes to the intentions of Western powers meddling into the affairs of Syria. As a neighbor, Lebanon has little faith in outside actors, even from a regional level, in interfering with the Syrian conflict.

Arab Gulf governments are supporting the arming of Syrian opposition groups, however for different reason. One is that politicians of Gulf countries converge with those of U.S. Those countries having experienced the Arab Spring and undergoing a democratic change hold that the Syrian revolution must continue with peaceful demonstrations. Arming the rebel groups would lead to deepening of strife throughout all of Syria. Gulf countries do wield tremendous financial resources in addition to powerful media clout at a regional level. The close relations between Gulf countries and the U.S could be seen by many people that such countries are executing politics of a major outside power.¹² The prevalent understanding is that most Arab Gulf countries are not comfortable with the new Egypt and the rest of Arab Spring countries. The foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates stated early in 2012 that Egypt had become a major source of instability in the region.¹³ For many, the statement is interpreted as Arab Gulf countries are being wary and even ambivalent as far as Arab Spring is concerned. With Qatar being different as the Qatari based al Jazeera TV network is never the less known for its sympathy to the Arab Spring movement.

The Palestinian issue is strongly present through the course of events in Syrian and the Arab Spring. The foreign minister of Qatar, Hamad Bin Jasseem, stressed that the war on Gaza on 2008 and 2009 was responsible for triggering the Arab Revolt.¹⁴ The foreign minister referred to the scenes of children and women killed under Israeli bombardments that caused horror and deep resentment not only against Israel but at the Arab dictatorial regimes remaining silent at the time. The Foreign minister warned the U.S from double-standard attitude which could fire back negatively at U.S within the Arab and Muslim public opinion. However, he called for an Islamic and American coordination to work together in resolving the crisis in Syria. Qatar asked for the U.S to work and cooperate with the emerging Islamic governments resulting from recent elections in Arab Spring countries.¹⁵ Such a view is shared by many

in the region in realizing the hope for a peaceful outcome for the Arab Revolt.

Hilf Al Fudul “The Coalition of Fudul”

Hilf Al Fudul is the traditional Islamic approach of intervention in case of crimes committed against civilians, injustices and, in general, abuses committed on civilian population.¹⁶ The term Hilf Al Fudul means the alliance or a coalition of certain tribes and societal representations in stopping crimes and establishing justice.¹⁷ In the case of Syria, the approach is to establish a coalition that include both popular participation and represented legitimate leadership. Internally, for Syria to overcome the crisis, a solution must come from the people in order to uphold diversity of different social segments in society by keeping unity and social cohesion in a free and plural society.¹⁸

With regard to the sensitive issue of the Alwite minority which President Assad belongs to, an internal development must affirm a common ground with the Alwite minority and the rest of the Syrian society. One way to achieve an inclusive role for the Alwites is for the minority community to sever ties with the ruling family of Assad. The Assad family has utilized the Alwite minority to its own political goals. However, the Alwite minority needs to participate in the downfall of the dictatorship in order to build a new Syria for all the Syrian people.¹⁹ The revolutionaries on their part can achieve the goals of Hilf Al Fudul by including the Alwite minority and not targeting them for revenge purposes. Acts of revenge against the minority would jeopardize such alliance where the social cohesion and inclusiveness are highly crucial for the success of the alliance.²⁰

At the international stage, the Syrian crisis is increasingly identified as a “civil war.” However, for the opposition, as being united in the face of regime atrocities, the term civil war is not promoted nor advocated by any leader from the opposition whether inside or outside Syria. Therefore, Hilf Al Fudul works to avoid civil war at costs and in the meanwhile to construct communication channels for various segments of society in order to ensure the success of the goals of the revolution and to keep the integrity of the Syrian people intact.²¹

Internally, despite the continuous bombardment of Syrian towns and villages by the Assad regime, reports have named several governments within Syria staging peaceful demonstrations.²² Throughout the country,

demonstrations indicate that the Syrian society is functioning in resistance to the regime from grass-root level. These Demonstrations took place despite heavy security presence by the regime forces. Moreover, the Syrian free army is becoming more consolidated internally and gaining widespread influence throughout the country. Such developments have become a basic launching base of the revolution in order to complete the liberation goal of the Syrian people.²³ The Syrian revolution is in fact protecting neighborhoods of Alwite minority in different parts of the country.²⁴

At regional level, a military intervention by strictly regional actors has been echoed. During the Bosnian crisis, NATO was allowed to intervene against the Serbs without a UN mandate.²⁵ It is argued that in the case of the ongoing crisis in Syria, an obligation based on moral, humane and legal, must be born upon the Arab and Muslim states to carry. Arab and Muslim countries can not abandon their responsibility just because the West is incapable. As events develop in Syria and around it, an alliance of some countries, namely, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, were put forward as an option. The goal is to form a trilateral alliance to protect civilians in Syria and to create a safe area starting from north of Syria and stretching horizontally along the Turkish border.²⁶

In conclusion, foreign Military intervention, or the use of Force under the principle of Right to Protect, is widely seen in the region with discontent and suspicion. With a background of foreign military intervention on Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, public sentiment in Arab countries is highly ambivalent on the issue of foreign military intervention. In the context of regional history and tradition, the concept of *Hilf Al Fudul*, Coalition of Fudul, is considered an option for internal Syrian societal forces to form a unified front against the atrocities and injustices of the government regime. The traditional approach of *Hilf Al Fudul* needs to invest efforts and reaching out to the Alwite minority of Syria and condemn any sectarian tendency of violence. The coalition of Fudul extends to regional countries, Arab and Islamic, in standing up to the crimes of the Syrian regime and help the Syrian people achieve their own freedom in an inclusive and plural society. The stakes are high for the people of Syria. The grass-root revolt against oppression embarked on a course of change in deciding a future of freedom, freedom, civil society and social justice.

The following suggestions can be considered recommendations for policy makers. Western military intervention is not an option. A military intervention could potentially spark a civil war as the ongoing violence is perceived as an armed opposition against the government regime. Arab and Muslim states need to consider the implementation of the traditional principle of *Hilf Al Fudul*, Alliance of Fudul, in unifying the Syrian opposition and maintain the social cohesion of the Syrian people including the Alwite minority. The Alwite minority should be encouraged to sever its ties with the Assad ruling family. At regional level, a coalition of regional Arab countries and Turkey to formulate a consensus policy of stopping the regime from committing atrocities is crucial. The establishing of regular regional meetings among Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran is important and should be promoted and encouraged. Establish a regional and international civil society network for humanitarian relief inside Syrian and for refugees residing in neighboring countries.

Notes

- 1 Research, The Emirates Center For Strategic Studies and. *Islamic Movements: Impact on Political Stability in the Arab World*. Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2003. P.54.
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- 3 Rozoff, Rick. *GLOBAL WARFARE: The Worldwide Deployment of NATO's Global Expeditionary Force*. 5 7, 2012. (accessed 5 31, 2012).
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- 5 Guardian, The. *Syria: what can be done? Five commentators discuss the merits of five ways in which the outside world could respond to Syria's crisis*. 2 10, 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/feb/10/syria-five-options> (accessed 4 12, 2012).
- 6 Ibid.
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- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Qassem, Sattar. *Arabs prestige increase with revolutions*. 4 15, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.net/analysis/pages/2d33f493-e104-46ed-bd74-7f4483eef599> (accessed 5 3, 2012).
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- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Huedi, Fehmi. *The revealing crisis of Arab weakness*. 5 3, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.net/pointofview/pages/0a852915-b342-49b5-bab9-fb7bcc63777a?GoogleStatID=2> (accessed 5 5, 2012).

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- 14 Net, Aljazeera. *Bin Jassem calls upon America to respect Islamic parties*. 5 29, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/e8257c0d-9892-41e1-bdf4-85147cd88e4e?GoogleStatID=9> (accessed 5 30, 2012).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Khatib, Muhath Al. *Al Jazeera TV Program, Al Sharia Wa Al Hayat*. Dosh: Al Jazeera TV, 8 12, 2012. Muhath Al Khatib is the current Leader of the Syrian Oppsotion Coalition working from outside Syria.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 AlGhazi, Tauba. *The Alwite community and Assad Family Rule*. 4 16, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.net/pointofview/pages/07980395-17e3-4463-b8e1-61eba084b2fb> (accessed 4 18, 2012).
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- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Newspaper, Al Quds Al Arabi. *Demonstrations in Syria and other regions*. 6 1, 2012. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=latest/data/2012-06-01-15-20-55.htm> (accessed 6 2, 2012).
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- 24 Ibid.
- 25 AlMubarak, Mohamoud. *A trilateral Alliance is required*. 5 30, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.net/pointofview/pages/d3618bc4-df30-406b-97be-5440e9144e12?GoogleStatID=1> (accessed 6 3, 2012).
- 26 Ibid.

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