

## Syria and the OPCW: Taking a Stock of the Situation

*Sudarshan Bhutani*

*Shri Sudarshan Bhutani is a retired foreign service officer and served as India's Ambassador to China.*

October 17, 2013

### **Summary**

The joint OPCW-UN team mandated to assist Syria with the elimination of its chemical weapon programme by mid-2014 may not be realistic. As in the case of Russia and the US, the deadline for the destruction of stockpile of chemical weapons has shifted considerably.

On 27 September 2013, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted unanimously a resolution which would eliminate chemical weapons in Syria. The resolution followed agreement between the US and Russia on the issue. Russia insisted and obtained an undertaking that coercive actions of the kind permitted by Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, would not be invoked without the specific authorization of UNSC. The Organisation for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons based in The Hague was authorized to begin inspection of Syrian weapons by first day of October. The resolution requires the Organization to complete dismantling of chemical weapons by mid-2014.

This deadline is unrealistic: while the Syrian regime admits to having chemical weapons, the armed opposition elements do not. Both the US and Russia are way behind their agreed schedule for dismantling/destruction of their stockpile of weapons. The US has managed to destroy about 90% of its stock and Russia about 74%. The deadline of destruction has shifted from 2007 to 2015 for Russia and to 2023 for US.

The resolution is silent on ending the conflict between Syrian government and opposing factions supported by foreign elements. A possible conference of the Syrian parties to the conflict under the auspices of interested powers has been mentioned. Nothing has been said about the non-Syrian groups taking part in the fighting.

## Conflict

The conflict in Syria has raged for at least two years. The change of authoritarian, autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt under massive public protest in early 2011, gave expression to the hope that similar regimes in the Arab world could be replaced by appropriate external encouragement (i.e. intervention). Libya became the first target. US, the United Kingdom (UK) and France pushed UNSC to mandate the change in Libya. It was represented as a humanitarian effort to remove a wayward dictator. In fact, it led to chaos: the sponsoring powers, UK and France, tried to secure their commercial interests rather than establish a viable government; tribal, religious and regional actors came to the fore and till today prevent the effective functioning of the elected government. Religious extremists took over in parts of the country: US ambassador was murdered in Benghazi (eastern Libya) by them.

At that time, Syria too faced internal unrest – not for the first time in its recent history. The attempt by the Western Powers to obtain similar authorization for intervention was refused by UNSC: other permanent member – Russia and China - were wary of their partisan intentions and did not agree, nor did the majority of non-permanent members. Overt and covert assistance began to flow to the Syrian opposition; it came mostly from neighbours, including some Gulf States. The conflict has led to an exodus – more than two million have taken refuge in neighbouring countries; some have gone as far as Yemen, a relatively poor country. Millions more have been made homeless. And more than 100,000 people have died since the conflict began in 2011.

The continued insurgency reached a turning point when chemical weapons were used in a suburb of Damascus on 21 August. The United States announced intent to 'punish' the regime, UK and France followed. However, the British public was opposed to any armed intervention and British Parliament refused to authorize it. The United States public and their elected representatives were equally opposed. Only the President of France was prepared to go ahead. At this stage, Russia chose to intercede on behalf of Syria: instead of unilateral intervention, it proposed divesting Syria of its chemical weapons. Syria accepted the Russian proposal while maintaining that chemical weapons had been used by the opposition. The protracted negotiation led to the 27 September resolution.

The resolution evoked predictable response from the Syrian contestants. Syria's Minister for National Reconciliation, Ali Haidar, told the Russian news agency, *Ria Novosti* : the agreement represented a "victory": "On one hand, it helps the Syrians emerge from the crisis and on the other it has allowed for averting war against Syria". The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces said that the resolution would embolden President Assad's government to "escalate its military offensive" across Syria. It warned that the Syrian government had a long record of breaking agreements and called for a UN Security Council resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Gen Salim Idris, the head of the Supreme Military Council of the rebel Free Syrian Army denounced the agreement. "All of this initiative does not interest us. Russia is a partner with the regime in killing the Syrian people," he told reporters in Istanbul. "A crime against humanity has been committed, and there is not any mention of accountability", he added

Indeed the resolution does little to mediate the conflict.

## Opposition

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed in August 2011 by army deserters based in Turkey. It mounted attacks on both Damascus and the second city, Aleppo. It suffered a defeat in February 2012, when it was forced to withdraw from its strongholds in Homs. Almost 700 people were killed, mostly by shells and rocket fire, within a month before FSA staged a "tactical withdrawal". Later, the leadership explained that FSA, unable to keep control of an area, moved from "one place to another, one city to another."

The Syrian National Council (SNC) is a coalition of opposition groups formed in October 2011. It is dominated by Syria's majority Sunni Muslim community, and has not won over minorities - Christians and Alawites - who constitute about 20% of the population. SNC has found it difficult to work with FSA. The National Co-ordination Committee, a group of dissidents within Syria is wary of the Islamists within the SNC.

A National Coalition (NC) was formed in November 2012. Like FSA and SNC it is based in Turkey, and is supported d by Western Powers. It claims to be recognized by more than a hundred countries as a legitimate representative of the opposition.

These Turkey-based organizations have been challenged by the Syrian Islamic Front – consisting of Salafist groups, variously estimated to number from ten to twenty-five (?) thousand. The Front seeks to establish an ‘Islamic Emirate’ (like the *Taliban*?) in Syria. Prominent among the twelve are the *Nusra Front* and *Ahrar al-Sham*. Some among these groups refuse to recognise the authority of the National Coalition or groups based abroad. They demand unity of the opposition in an “Islamic framework”. Some moderate Islamist groups affiliated with the National Coalition (NC), have defected to the Islamist Front. Clashes have occurred between the ‘moderates’ and ‘radicals’ over resources and territory along Syria’s northern and eastern border. An FSA commander was murdered by an Islamist group in July 2013. FSA lost the town of *Azaz* to the *Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*, the most hardline group in the Front. Several FSA men were killed, perhaps as many as 100 captured. Inside the town, there were reports of arrests of opposition activists and citizen-journalists.

## Turkey

Until recently, Turkey had pursued a policy of conciliation and non-interference towards its neighbours, especially to the east– Syria, Iran, Israel. This so-called doctrine of “zero problems with neighbours” gained wide recognition since it was accompanied by a policy of social and political reforms at home, buttressed by solid economic development. The *Arab Spring* changed Turkish perceptions and policies. Prime Minister Erdogan welcomed the rise of Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia, and later denounced the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt by the military. He extended support to HAMAS, the Palestinian group supported by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and controlling the government in Gaza. He got embroiled in a controversy (since resolved) over Gaza’s economic blockade by Israel.

Unrest in Syria has become a central concern of his government. While excluding the option of unilateral intervention, Turkey has given diplomatic and logistic support to the Syrian opposition. Military support is suspected. This has strained Turkish economy – at least half-a-million refugees have entered Turkey. It has led to social tensions between the refugees engaged in resistance to the Alawite rule of Syria and the Alawite citizens of Turkey, who support Assad.

The intensifying clashes in Syria have raised acute concerns about Turkey’s security: increasing dominance of fundamentalist groups over an ineffective and fragmented resistance dependent on Turkish support; diminishing domestic support for any overt interference in the Syrian civil war. And, Turkey must take into account support of Russia and of Iran to the Assad regime in Syria. Unwillingness of the United States to intervene, gives an air of hopelessness to Turkey’s predicament.

## Prospect

In the midst of this gloom, Qadri Jamal, a former communist, and deputy prime minister in the Syrian government claimed that the conflict had reached a stalemate; neither side was strong enough to defeat the other. He was speaking to *Guardian*, the British newspaper. He wanted the peace talks to resume in Geneva, which could lead to a ceasefire and a peaceful political process free from external interference. Geneva has been the venue of conversations concerning Syria among interested parties, including the UNSC permanent members.

This call for peaceful political process was supported by President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani. He promised to help find peace in Syria. Earlier, soon after the passage of the UNSC resolution, the Russian Foreign Minister suggested an “international peace conference on Syria” in October.

To this chorus of need for reconciliation in Syria, BRICs foreign ministers added their voice. Meeting in New York on 26 September, they expressed “deep concern” on the continuing violence and deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria. They “welcomed” Syria’s accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention and destruction of its weapons under international auspices. Since there was no military solution to the conflict in Syria, an international conference should be convened to restore peace, and reconciliation to Syria. “They expressed their full support to the efforts of the UN-Arab League Representative Lakhdar Brahimi in helping finding a political solution to the crisis.”

Other than Turkey, the opponents of the existing Assad-led regime have relied on the support of some Arab states in the Gulf; their purpose is to weaken and overthrow the current pro-Iranian regime in Syria. There does not seem to be any international support for this endeavour, especially if the opposition is led by *al-Qaeda* affiliates. Possible serious dialogue between Iran and its Western interlocutors, makes it unlikely that Syrian regime would face military pressure from the Western Powers. Nor would the United States jeopardize the prospect of constructive dialogue with Iran.

## What about the Syrians?

Syria is difficult to govern. It is heterogeneous – ethnically, socially and religion-wise. Historically, each group has lived in separate areas, supported its own interests and maintained close links with similar groups in neighbouring countries. The postwar (i.e., Second World War) civilian government was overthrown in 1949 by an army officer, who was replaced by another one and then another one. In the heyday of Arab solidarity, Syria sought a union with Egypt, which lasted only three years from 1958-61. Another group of army officers sustained a civilian regime until 1963, when a group of Alawite (a Shia minority sect) military officers took over. They were *Ba'athists* (Arab socialists) and were following the example of their counterparts in Iraq. Just as Saddam Hussein, a

*Ba'athist*, was gaining power in Iraq, Hafez al-Assad, also a *Ba'athist* army officer, took control in Syria in 1970 and proclaimed himself as president in March 1971. The regime – a coalition of *Ba'ath*, military, and bureaucracy set up by Hafez al-Assad – is supported by an Alawite network of civil and military officers, rules to this day under his son, Bashar al-Assad. Continued opposition and current unrest have narrowed the base of support; even close relatives have deserted President Bashar al-Assad.

Syria supported Egypt in its conflict with Israel and lost territory on both occasions – in 1967 and in 1973. When Egypt signed peace treaties with Israel in 1979-80, Assad refused to negotiate – he was conscious of support he derived from Arab nationalists and the Palestinians living in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. More important, he feared an overthrow masterminded by Saddam Hussein.

The Iraqi covert attempts to unite both countries engendered personal and national rivalry. When Iraq attacked the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran in 1980, Assad sided with Shiite Iran – an alliance which continues to date and is responsible for Syria's isolation from the Arab states in the Gulf region. Bashar has established a working relationship with post-Saddam Iraq, facilitated by a Shia-led Iranian-supported government in Baghdad. Bashar also normalized relations with Turkey – he ended support to the Kurds seeking autonomy or secession from Turkey, and handed over Ocalan, the legendary leader of Kurdish armed struggle against Turkish rule of Kurdish lands. As stated earlier, this relationship did not last long.

Hafiz and Bashar, the father-son duo, have kept the Syrian-Israeli border generally quiet since 1973. Not a shot was fired and no one infiltrated into Israel-occupied Golan Heights, which is monitored by UN contingents. Israel has used force to destroy alleged nuclear facilities in Syria, an attack which did not evoke retaliation. In turn, Syria has used proxies to threaten its southern neighbour. For over three decades Hezbollah did that job and kept Israel busy.

It remains to be seen whether Russian and Iranian support is sufficient to sustain Bashar al-Assad in power and help forge a coalition with non Islamist dissidents. There are not many examples of power-sharing in the region.