

Who Fired The First Shot?

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The peace conference on Syria that began on January 22 in Geneva was not even a day old before two huge spanners had been thrown into its works. Iran was dis-invited from the conference at the last moment, and 55,000 pictures allegedly showing Syrian government forces torturing and killing 11,000 civilians were leaked to The Guardian and CNN. These developments expose the titanic behind-the-scenes struggle that is going on to derail the conference. The reason is that it has ramifications that go far beyond the future of Syria.

A momentous turn in western policies towards the Middle East is underway. Till only weeks ago Iran was a rogue state; Syria was a brutal family run dictatorship allied to Iran, and the Hezbollah in Lebanon and therefore a sworn enemy of Israel and the west. Russia and China were spoilers intent upon propping up anti-west regimes in a senseless prolongation of cold war hostilities. Israel was the west's staunchest ally in the Middle East, followed closely by Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates its principal providers of oil and military bases in the Middle East. Despite several hiccups the Arab world was still regarded as a victory for the democracy over dictatorship and a vindication of the west's export of democracy and human rights to the rest of the world even if this was being done through the barrel of a gun.

These beliefs now lie in ruins. The west has belatedly realized that however oppressive the dictatorships in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria may have been, the alternative that stares them in the face – militant Islamist theocracies spawning Jihadis in ruined economies, is infinitely worse. Its intervention in the 'Arab Spring' has been an unqualified

disaster. Instead of strengthening its hold on the middle east , it has come close to delivering it into the hands of its most inveterate enemies. And it has been led down this self-destructive path by its own supposed allies—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Turkey – which have been playing their private power games with western, notably American bullets.

President Obama is the first western leader to perceive the trap into which the west has fallen, and reach out to Russia to forge a joint strategy for recovery. Their joint efforts have begun to bear fruit. Syria is close to completing the handing over of its chemical weapons and factories to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and is about to sign the Chemical weapons convention of 1992. Iran has taken its first essential steps to halt the enrichment of uranium with the fissile isotope, U-235, to the 20 percent. The Geneva II peace talks are designed to chart out the next steps in the stabilization of the middle east, and once more, the key to this is the restoration of peace and a secular, preferably democratic, government in Syria.

But the weight of past mistakes and misperceptions hangs heavily over the conference's outcome. The chief obstacle to this is the west's demonization of Assad as a butcher of his own people. So successful has this been that Obama is now hard pressed to explain his sudden volte face. This has already cast a pall over the conference for, to maintain a semblance of continuity in its policies and defend the correction of its past perceptions Washington has joined Britain, France and Israel and their Sunni Arab allies to keep Iran out of the conference, and to insist that Assad must relinquish power to a transitional government before they agree to stop supplying the rebels with weapons.

These moves, on the very first day of the conference, had already cast a pall over its prospects, The release of e 55,000 photographs depicting torture and murder, allegedly by Syria's security apparatus, could well lead to its premature

end. It is therefore imperative to examine whether Assad really is the demon that the international media have made him out to be over the past three years.

The case it has built against him runs as follows: First, within months of succeeding his father Hafez Al Assad, in 2001, he had promised to turn Syria into a democracy but reneged on it repeatedly in the ensuing ten years. Second, he has run a brutal dictatorship that has felt no qualms about turning its guns on its own people' Third his regime has committed innumerable human rights abuses culminating in the use of chemical weapons against its own people.

Finally it is the excesses of his own regime that have triggered the uprising of his people, drawn thousands of Jihadis from all over the world to Syria, and inflicted untold misery on his own people. The west must therefore end this war, no matter how, in the interests of the Syrians themselves.

Did Assad go back on promises of democracy?

Syrians whom I interviewed in October 2012 in Damascus, however, had a different story to tell. Assad had sincerely wished to start the transition to democracy a decade earlier, but was forced to postpone the changeover repeatedly by the growing turmoil in Syria's neighbourhood –the US' invasion of Iraq in 2003; the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri and the concerted bid to force Syria out of Lebanon in 2004; Washington's decision to break diplomatic relations with Damascus in 2005; Israel's attack on Lebanon in 2006, its blockade of Palestine in 2007, and its bombing of Gaza in 2009. Faisal Al Mekdad, Syria's vice minister for foreign affairs and its former permanent representative at the UN, summed up Assad's dilemma as follows: "Each of these events reminded us of the need for unity in the face of external pressures and threats, and forced us to postpone democratization for fear of setting off fresh internal

conflicts and forcing adjustments when we could least afford them'.

According to Bassam Abu Abdallah, a professor of International affairs at Damascus university, these external pressures did not make Assad entirely abandon the quest for democracy. It did, however, limit his reforms to devolving more administrative power to local government and lifting restrictions on press freedom. The most significant development of this period was a regional conference of the Baath party in Damascus in 2005. This conference drew up the blueprint for the sweeping democratic reforms that Assad has enacted in 2011 and 2012.

Was there a spontaneous protest and was it peaceful?

Despite the rethinking that has begun on wisdom of the western intervention in Syria it remains axiomatic among western journalists that Assad brought the civil war upon himself. Syria had been convulsed by a spontaneous movement for democracy, that the Assad regime converted into an insurgency by using overwhelming force against the peaceful demonstrators. But Syrians I talked to in October 2012, and resident diplomats concurred, that there had been no spontaneous popular upsurge against the regime in Syria, and that the civil war was a fructification of plans for regime change that had been hatched much earlier and brought forward because the opportunity provided by the 'Arab Spring', and western liberals' ecstatic response to it, was too good to miss.

Damascus first became aware of the conspiracy when trouble broke out on March 18, 2011 in Dera'a, a small city astride the Syria – Jordan border. A peaceful demonstration demanding some political changes in the local administration and lowering of diesel prices turned violent when shots were fired killing four persons. The international media, led by the Qatar-based Al Jazeera, and the Riyadh-based Al Arabiya

television channels immediately accused Assad's forces of firing into the crowd to disperse it.

The Syrian government's version of what had happened was entirely different. The first shots, it claimed, were fired on March 18 but not by the police. They were fired by armed men who had infiltrated the procession and, at a pre-determined moment, begun to shoot at the security police. That is why, of the four persons killed on that day, one was a policeman. However, according to Dr Mekdad, what convinced the government that the Dera'a uprising was part of a larger conspiracy was what happened when the police sent for reinforcements. Armed men ambushed one of the trucks as it entered Dera'a and killed all the soldiers in it.

The Syrian government chose not to publicise this for fear of demoralizing its soldiers, But a careful search on the internet did provide indirect corroboration. Suleiman Khalidi, the local correspondent of Reuters, reported on March 23 that 37 bodies had been brought to the Dera'a hospital till then. The number was intriguing because all news reports had been unanimous that 13 civilians had been killed till March 23, so where did the other 24 bodies come from?

Incontrovertible confirmation came a month later when 'peaceful protesters' stopped an army truck outside Dera'a and again killed all the 20 soldiers in it. But this time they did so by cutting their throats. This was the sanctified method of killing that the 'Afghanis', as the Afghanistan-returned Jihadis were called in Algeria, had used to kill more than ten thousand villagers during two years of bitter insurgency after the First Afghan war. It was to be seen over and over again in Syria in the coming months.

The Syrian government again chose to remain silent, and the only whiff of this event in the media was a rebel claim that they had captured and burnt an armoured personnel carrier. But in Damascus the US Ambassador, Robert Ford, told a group of

Ambassadors that included the Indian ambassador, that the Syrian insurgency had been infiltrated by Al Qaeda. He had come to this conclusion because, in addition to cutting throats, the insurgents had cut off the head of one of the soldiers.

Who killed Whom?

As the civil war intensified and the killing of civilians skyrocketed, the insurgents, now labeled and recognized by the west as the "Free Syrian Army" followed a set pattern of attack: This was to descend without warning on small towns, Alaouite villages and small army and police posts in hundreds, overwhelm them. After they surrendered, the insurgents would kill local officials, civilians they deemed to be pro-Assad and soldiers who would not desert to them, and claim that these were in fact deserters whom the government forces had executed after a successful counter attack. Two such episodes captured worldwide attention in 2011.

In Jisr al Shugour, a medium sized town in the northern border province of Idlib, the international media reported, based upon rebel claims, that the government had brought in not only tanks but also helicopters to bomb the town from the air- the first resort to air power against 'protestors'. When some soldiers, who were disgusted by the indiscriminate carnage, attempted to defect the Syrian troops killed them. The indiscriminate firing forced civilians to flee to nearby villages. Some crossed over to Turkey.

This claim captured the headlines in the western media for days, but the story pieced together by a diplomat whom the Syrian government took to Jisr-al Shugour when the town had been recaptured, was however very different. In the beginning of June 2011 some five to six hundred fighters of the Free Syrian Army suddenly laid siege to the town for 48 hours. When the army sent in reinforcements the rebels, who had mined a bridge on the approach road blew it up as a truck was passing

over it, killed the soldiers and cut the only access to the town by road. Two days later, when they overwhelmed the garrison, instead of taking them prisoner they killed all of them, many by cutting their throats, threw their bodies into the Orontes river, and later posted videos claiming that these were army defectors whom the Syrian forces had killed.

This was corroborated two months later by a resident of the town who came to the Indian embassy to get a visa. According to him between 500 and 600 rebels had descended upon the town from Turkey. On the way they stopped a bus, shot six of its passengers and spread the word that the army had done it. Many people believed them, were enraged and stood by as the hunt for fleeing soldiers and supporters of the government began. Some joined in the hunt. In all, he said, the number of soldiers and government supporters killed and dumped in the Orontes was not 120 but close to 300. This was the first of dozens of similar war crimes by the FSA.

Till the end of May the Syrian government's frequent assertions that it was the rebels who were opening fire first, forcing the state forces to return their fire, had been treated with disdain by the western media or simply ignored. But it too was vindicated when Hala Jaber, a British journalist with a Lebanese father, the Diplomatic correspondent of the Sunday Times and a two time winner of human rights journalism awards, described precisely how violence on the scale of Deraa was unleashed upon the city of Ma'arrat -al Numan, not far from Jisr-al-Shugour.

"They came in their thousands to march for freedom in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, a shabby town surrounded by pristine fields of camomile and pistachio in the restive northwest of Syria.

The demonstration followed a routine familiar to everyone who had taken part each Friday for the past 11 weeks, yet to attend on this occasion required extraordinary courage.

The previous week four protesters had been shot dead for trying to block the main road between Damascus, the capital, and Aleppo, the country's largest city. The week before that, four others were killed.

So enraged were the townspeople at the blood spilt by the Mukhabarat, or secret police, that intermediaries had struck a deal between the two sides. Four hundred members of the security forces had been withdrawn from Ma'arrat in return for the promise of an orderly protest. The remainder, 49 armed police and 40 reserves, were confined to a barracks near the centre of town. By the time 5,000 unarmed marchers reached the main square, however, they had been joined by men with pistols.

At first the tribal elders leading the march thought these men had simply come prepared to defend themselves if shooting broke out. But when they saw more weapons – rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers held by men with heavy beards in cars and pick-ups with no registration plates – they knew trouble lay ahead.'

Demonisation intensified – Houla and chemical weapons

February 2012 was a turning point in the Syrian civil war. Bashar Al Assad held a referendum for the Syrian people to endorse the new, democratic constitution that he had promised to the Syrian democracy movement at a conference held in Damascus in the previous July, and the Syrian army recaptured Baba Amr, the FSA's stronghold in the city of Homs, after a four month siege.

This twin setback forced a change of strategy upon Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and their western backers. From February Saudi Arabia started shipping arms openly to the FSA and offering vast bribes – salaries ranging from %100 to \$3,000 a month to Syrian soldiers and officers to desert from the army and join the FSA. On the other, they ramped up the effort to

demonise Assad till no one in the west would dare to have any dealings with him again.

The first major effort occurred four months on May 25 2012. Reports appeared almost simultaneously in several international media that Assad's army and Shabiha irregulars had massacred 108 people, including 49 children and 34 women, using knives, hatchets and guns in the villages of Houla and Taldou, close to Lattaqia in the north of the country. The timing of this massacre was suspicious because it occurred within days of Syria's first ever multi party election under the new constitution. But based on these reports, supposedly by eyewitnesses, 11 western countries, Japan and Turkey expelled Syria's ambassador and the UN security council set up an independent commission of inquiry into the massacre.

Only later did it emerge that all of these reports had been based upon the statements of a single supposedly 11 but probably 8 or 9 year old boy, and that several other eyewitnesses had given detailed, graphic accounts, which showed that the killers were Islamists belonging to the so-called 'Free Syrian Army'. A detailed investigation by a European Citizen's group, published in May 2013 revealed that five groups of the FSA that had taken part in the massacre. By then, however, the damage had been done.

Inspite of this, as the summer wore on the pendulum continued to swing in favour of the government. By October 2012 it was the FSA that was on the run. Its fragmented leadership was incapable of coherent action and the trickle of deserters from the Syrian army had all but dried up. Its cries for help from a direct intervention by the west on the Libya model grew more shrill. It may not therefore be a coincidence that October was the month in which Israel 's satellites 'discovered' that the Syrian army was mixing the chemicals normally held separately that together produce Sarin Gas.

Thus was planted the seed of the diplomatic -cum-propaganda

offensive that first trapped Obama in December 2012 into promising to attack Syria if it crossed the red line of using chemical weapons, and then culminated in the Sarin gas attack against civilians in the Ghouta on August 13 last year the precise day on which a UN team of inspectors began its investigations into two earlier allegations of gas attacks in Damascus and Aleppo that, by then, had been all but proven to have been launched by the insurgents.

The last throw of the dice

By then however, behind the screen of rhetoric defending its past actions, the US had seen through the game. It knew that the Syrian National Coalition which had replaced the Syrian National Council as the west's chosen vehicle for replacing Assad, was anything but a coalition; that al Qaeda and its affiliates had taken over the war against Assad and a moderate FSA was a fiction; that its Arab allies were arming the Jihadis with wire-guided anti-tank missiles and surface to air heat seeking missiles against its express wishes, and that Al Qaeda was using the war in Syria to re-invigorate Al Qaeda in Iraq.

With enormous courage therefore, Obama has turned US policy around 180 degrees from confrontation towards cooperation, from military pressure to diplomatic persuasion. A new era is trying to be born, therefore, in international relations. But this turnaround has left Israel and the Gulf sheikhdoms especially vulnerable. The 55,000 picture assault on Assad's regime unveiled, with a by now familiar accuracy in timing, could therefore be their latest attempt to using the military and diplomatic might of the US to continue down the road to war and destruction. It could be their last throw of the dice.