Valuation of Positions

The Syrian Issue at a Critical Crossroad

15 Aug 2017

Policy Studies Unit

Harmoon Center
For Contemporary Studies
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To achieve its objectives, the Centre conducts its activities through five specialized units, (1) Policy Studies Unit, (2) Social Researches Unit, (3) Books Review Unit, (4) Translation and Arabization Unit, and (5) Legal Unit.

A set of action programs are also adopted, such as the program for Political Consultations and Initiatives; Program for Services, Media Campaigns, and Public Opinion Making Program; Program for Dialogue Support and Civil and Cultural Development Program; Syria Future Program. The Centre may add new programs depending on the actual needs of Syria and the region. In implementing its programs, the Centre deploys multiple mechanisms, including lectures, workshops, seminars, conferences, training courses, as well as paper and electronic press.
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Introduction

On August the third, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir met with the delegation of the Higher Committee for Negotiations of the Syrian opposition. The meeting could be considered a major turning point in the Syrian issue, not because of its importance, but for the new significant positions declared by the Saudi minister and conveyed to the delegation. The media reacted in shock, which prompted the Saudi Foreign Ministry to announce that what the media reported on the Saudi minister was inaccurate and that the Kingdom still supported (the Higher Committee for Negotiations), the process to expand it, and to unify the opposition.

First: Riyadh meeting and disappointment

During the meeting, Al-Jubeir spoke briefly about several key points related to the Syrian opposition, the transitional phase, the Arab and international position, and finally the future of the Syrian issue. He pointed out unambiguously to the awkward stage in which the Syrian issue and the opposition are being induced into. This implied that Russia has succeeded in preventing the overthrow of Assad and is now the strongest element in Syria, and that is why the regional countries will have to veer towards what the Russians want, namely the survival of the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad, in power during the transitional period. He hinted that the principal task of the Syrian opposition and friendly countries in the next stage was working to persuade the United States to put its weight to ensure there was no role for Assad in Syria’s future after the transition if the United States endorsed the Russian principle.

According to the leaks, Al-Jubeir has also supported the inclusion of the Moscow and Cairo platforms in the Higher Committee for Negotiations and called for convening a Riyadh II conference to make changes, including the incorporation of these two platforms. Additionally, he called for the emergence of a new vision for the opposition, adapted to the facts on the ground and the new international situation. Finally, he warned that in the absence of such a vision, the superpowers might seek a solution outside the opposition. However, the spokesman of the Committee, Salim al-Musallat, denied in a statement on August 7, the validity of these leaks, and categorically denied the existence of an invitation to the so-called
"Riyadh 2 conference." But he confirmed the invitation to political, revolutionary, and civil society figures to meet in Riyadh with the committee that will consider expanding itself, stressing that it will not accept any individual who approved the presence of Assad.

Based on the Saudi minister's talk, according to the leaks, one can conclude that the United States has endorsed the path drawn by the Russians, despite all the high-profile statements made by some US officials about the Syrian regime and the fate of its head.

The Saudi message, or more accurately, the message carried by Saudi Arabia to the Syrian opposition, on behalf of other parties, regardless of its contents, has been accompanied by two important and contradictory developments, which are directly related to this message, one military and the other political.

**Second: Military developments**

The military development related to the above was the Russians speeding up a series of local truces, starting in southwestern Syria, and moving to the eastern Ghouta in the countryside of Damascus, then to the northern countryside of Homs, and continuing to other parts of Syria. The Syrian regime who is a fan of the military solution had no objection on these truces, neither the Iranians, despite the fact that they were forced to abandon many of their positions, especially in southern Syria. The armed opposition factions did not hesitate to accept them, despite the fact that they were given no real guarantees other than that of Russia itself, which until recently was a partner and protector of the regime.

The truces were agreed hastily. The truce of the south was announced on the 7th of last July, without consulting the Syrians, and away from them. The al-Ghouta truce, announced on the 23rd of the same month, took place in Cairo after three days of meetings between the Russians and the opposition armed factions. The less truce of the Northern countryside of Homs was announced on 3rd of August and was agreed at the same speed.
Although any respite is welcome for the Syrians from all sides, as it will reduce the level of violence of the regime and its Iranian and Russian allies as well, and stop the wave of murder and destruction, but it won’t bring lasting peace to Syria. The Russian guarantee of the ceasefire is not enough, it is prone to manipulating and collapse, and the Syrians have experienced similar Russian practices previously when Russia would send its planes after any truce agreement to bombard the same areas on the pretext of terrorist groups. These truces also hold a risk of deepening the division of territories between the opposition and the regime. They will remain likely to collapse in any dispute, as long as there is no clear program for the next step, and of course, as long as they are not accompanied by a comprehensive political solution based on the Geneva statement, to ensure the political transition that the Syrians are waiting for.

In addition to that, another more limited development is the announcement of the United States of its decision to stop arming the armed opposition in southern Syria. Even if this ruling does not have much effect on the armed opposition, which receives no military or arming support from the United States, it has a significant media and political dimension.

**Third: Political Development**

The political development directly related to al-Jubair was the Syrians finding out that the negotiating delegation in Geneva had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Platforms of Moscow and Cairo\(^{(1)}\), contrary to what has been claimed in the press that the understanding was still under discussion, and the rift was still wide, especially with the Moscow platform. This document has sufficient concessions to doubt the intentions and objectives of the signatories. Since it was done without the knowledge of the Higher Commission for the Negotiations and its general coordinator, the Commission protested against it, but what had been has been done. The general Coordinator of the Higher Committee - according to many sources - to threaten to resign and leave the Commission because it would go to the abyss with such directions.

\(^{(1)}\) The complete memorandum was published by Geroun media Network at 6\(^{th}\) of August 2017. It can be found on the following link: [http://www.geroun.net/archives/90665](http://www.geroun.net/archives/90665)
The protocol was composed of three documents. The first is about the "Constitution", and they are marginal and procedural. The second is about "principles", which are theoretical principles that not all parties disagree on. The biggest problem is the third document which is "a common opinion on the mediator’s results", that was agreed upon by the delegation of the High Commission with the Moscow and Cairo platforms, in which they accepted less than the Geneva 1 statement. The document did not state that the envisaged transitional ruling committee would have "full executive powers" in Geneva 1, but rather "replace existing governance arrangements", which is an ambiguous phrase, which could mean the reordering of the set of laws, regulations, and institutions, without any substantial change in them.

The documents they agreed on did not set any rules or precise descriptions for the members of the Transitional Governing Council. They did not rule out of this committee those who had blood on their hands or those who committed documented war crimes and allowed any person to take part even they were the most dangerous criminals of the regime.

The delegation of the High Commission for Negotiations and the Moscow and Cairo Platforms have also agreed that the transitional government body could "include" some of the opposition, the regime, independents individuals "from other sides", without specifying who these other parties were, or the proportion of each party. This means that they have officially accepted what had been thrown to them from the crumbs.

Most seriously, the document did not address the fate of Assad, as if its survival was not subject to negotiation and deliberation, and that is not the worst part. They consented to work under current Syrian constitution during the transitional period, which may last for years, which is a law that gives the President absolute powers and gives him all legislative, executive, and judiciary authorities. They neglected to mention the need to suspend the work of the current constitution or the adoption of a constitutional declaration. Moreover, they did not address the need for the exit of foreign militias fighting in Syria, which is the basis of sectarian escalation in favour of the regime. They assumed that the army and security services will remain the same and will be reformed after the end of the transitional period, the establishment of a constitution, and the holding of elections. Also, they have abandoned in their documents the subject of transitional justice, which if not applied at least on war criminals, Syria will not calm down.
This document is almost similar to the one presented by the UN envoy Stephane de Mistura to the parties to the conflict in Syria, the regime and the opposition, to examine. It is rather below the roof of demands, which indicates that the Syrian opposition volunteered and agreed to what the UN envoy put forward, and even went below what the man had presented, bearing in mind that none of his initiatives for Syria ever worked. All this confirms the suspicion that the negotiating delegation received instructions to sign the document with the Moscow platform, which - in the eyes of the Syrian opposition - was still close to the regime and even a partner to it.

**Fourth: Required work**

Therefore, there is grave concern that the negotiating delegation will have negotiating principles different from those approved by the Riyadh Conference and the Geneva 1 statement, which will have a standard that is so low that the Syrian opposition will not guarantee to achieve any of the objectives of the Syrian revolution.

In the midst of these facts, the complexities and the pressures facing them, it seems that the Syrian opposition is on a cross road. Their first option would be to give up the requirement to change the head of the Syrian regime, and give up changing the security system, under the pretext of "political realism" and accept the partnership with the Moscow platform, which had similar proposals like those of the regime. They would have to take the Kurdish Democratic Union Party too, the partner of the Syrian regime in displacement, killing, and fighting the opposition. Then they would have to enter into pre-programmed negotiations, prepared in its final recommendations and results, and accept the role of the “National Progressive Front”, in its new apparel, on the ruins of a devastated country, millions of homeless and displaced people, and countless tragedies. The other option is for this opposition to realise what is being conspired, to stick to the basics, to apply "political realism" to their advantage, and to put pressure with the maximum means to ensure that the change of the totalitarian security regime, not individuals, is the next step.
The Syrian opposition can reject what is imposed on it, even though it is fragile. The international community needs it, and its rebellion and its refusal to comply with this or that will push the international community to revise because it will not be able to overpass it, as it is the one who can legalise any agreement, solution or outcome.

Fifth: Conclusion

The dispersed and sporadic Syrian opposition, could not efficiently bear the cause of the Syrian people to the community and the people of the whole world, because of its limitations, the intensity of the international intervention, its over dependence on the outside world, and its lack of appreciation of it people’s capabilities and energies. But at the same time, it can derive strength from the revolution audience, the sacrifices of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, and in the voices of millions of people affected, displaced and immigrated. It must be solid for once. Otherwise, it will drag Syria into a future that is no less dangerous and miserable than the last five decades.

It is no longer enough for the Syrian opposition to consolidate its forces, objectives and strategies. It is no longer sufficient to examine alternatives to ways of dealing with the international community and find new mechanisms and tactics. Rather, it is necessary for them, as institutions and entities, to “sieve” their leaders, and kick out those who want to meet the regime’s supporters and their plans, the double faced and the objectors. They must reduce the burden of international interventions even if they are forced to dissolve their existing formations and to place the dependency of the Syrian catastrophe caused by the regime and its allies upon the international community, which turned a blind eye to war crimes against a whole nation. Simultaneously, they need to be moving towards building new political and civilian forces capable of carrying out the objectives of the Syrian revolution.

There is no fear for the revolution of people that have offered hundreds of thousands of martyrs, millions of displaced people, and the arguments of history and politics confirm that social revolutions are rarely defeated, but rarely triumph straight after they're launched. They may change their paths and change their means and adjust mechanisms, depending on the
circumstances and the level of challenges and interventions, as well as the presence of an incompetent opposition delaying the process and making difficult its near and far tasks.

Today, the Syrian opposition stands at a crossroads, either be "small" even in the eyes of its supporters, giving back the legitimacy of the murderous totalitarian regime or be as big as the Syrian tragedy.