



Great powers fiddle while Syria burns

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Syrians in the rebel-held 'liberated zones' marked the beginning of the US and Russian-brokered 'cessation of hostilities' by coming out onto the streets in their tens of thousands, with anti-Assad rallies reported in 104 different locations on 4 March, the first Friday after the ceasefire took effect.

The demonstrators chanted slogans not just against the murderous Assad dictatorship and its Russian and Iranian backers, but also against sectarian forces like ISIS and the Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda. Indicating its real relationship with the civilian popular movement, Nusra responded by threatening to shoot protesters in Idlib province on 8 March, prompting condemnations from the country's biggest Islamist rebel group, Ahrar al-Sham.

Elsewhere, anti-Assad protests held in Rojava by the opposition Syrian Kurdish National Council (KNC) were repressed by the ruling Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD also tried to ban KNC-led protests on 19 May marking the hundredth anniversary of the Sykes-Picot agreement, in which Britain and France divided up the Arab countries between them and left the Kurds without a state of their own.

This was always the real risk of any ceasefire for the Assad regime, that any let-up in its violence against civilians would allow the popular democratic movement to emerge from under the rubble and revive the anti-sectarian message that characterised the early, unarmed, street-based phase of the revolution in 2011, before Assad decided to plunge the country into civil war.

In regime-held Hama, 800 political prisoners seized control of their prison on 2 May, amid reports that five inmates were being moved elsewhere for execution. The regime had originally prepared to storm the prison three days later, but eventually had to agree to the release of a total of 72 inmates to bring the uprising to an end, in a sign that even in regime-held areas its absolute control is far from certain.

Indeed, there were reports of security forces attacking unarmed and mainly youthful demonstrators from the supposedly 'quiescent' Druze minority in regime-held Suwayda on 15 April and 13 May.

It is precisely because of this risk that the relative calm could not be allowed to continue. Assad regime forces and their allies violated the ceasefire 312 times during its very first week, in particular by resuming the bombing of Douma in the Damascus suburbs. In the process, they killed 135 people in the areas covered by the ceasefire, as well as 552 people in areas not covered (primarily areas held by ISIS). The regime's bombardment of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, has escalated since, almost to pre-'ceasefire' levels.

On 12 May, the regime even blocked deliveries of food to Darayya, one of the many vic- tims of its calculated starvation sieges, before shelling the civilians who had come out to receive it. And, despite President Vladimir Putin's announcement of a Russian 'withdrawal' from Syria on 14 March, Russia's continued support for the Assad regime has been central to its resumption of the war.

Yet the US-led Western coalition in Syria, which claims to be in favour of a 'transition towards democracy', has not just turned a blind eye to these violations, but has indicated that it has no real objection to them.

US Colonel Steven Warren said in a press conference on 25 April that the Russian and Assad regime attacks on Aleppo

did not violate the ceasefire because 'it's primarily al-Nusra who holds Aleppo', and Nusra is not a party to the 'cessation of hostilities'.

This is nonsense: the deeply unpopular Nusra Front has only about 100 fighters in Aleppo, a city with about 300,000 inhabitants (about a third of its pre-war population); and Nusra were forced to withdraw the few thousand fighters they had there previously as a result of civilian protests and the response to them of the more popular secular nationalist and 'moderate Islamist' militias.

Warren subsequently withdrew his statement on 7 May, perhaps realising that this effective carte blanche to Russia and Assad threatened to unravel the USA's own delicate plans to use its intervention in Syria to recover its waning regional influence. By then the damage had been done; and the message was received that the Western coalition will not lift a finger to save Syrian civilians in the rebel-held areas for as long as the Syrian opposition have not yet been coerced into accepting a 'negotiated transition' with Assad still at the helm. This is what the Western powers really mean by the demand that the rebels should 'break with the extremists' in their ranks.

This might seem inexplicable to those people who have bought the lie that the Syrian revolution was a Western plot for 'regime change', or for those supporters of the revolution who still hold out the hope that the West will one day make good on its democratic promises. The fact is that the Western powers, like Russia, want to preserve Assad's security state as a force for 'stability', differing only on the means and the timetable for Assad's own eventual removal.

This has led them to discuss the possibility of a federal division of Syria (in which Russia and the USA would compete for influence over the Rojava Kurds), and a new constitution that would surround Assad and his successors with powerless 'deputies', presumably drawn from the pro-US elements of the opposition.

We should draw the appropriate conclusion: not to demand that the West 'confronts Putin' in Syria, but to recognise that its cynical game of chess with Russia is part of the problem. Like the Palestinians, the Syrian people are also the victims of an unholy alliance of the interests of powerful and competing states, and like them, they too deserve solidarity and practical assistance in their struggle against the odds. Freedom from dictatorship, and national self-determination for the Kurds, will be a powerful blow against tyranny everywhere, and in particular in Palestine and Iraq.

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