



A Decade On: Lessons from Syria

The uprising in Syria will later this year reach its decade anniversary. As this takes place, the end game in Syria is now underway as the last remaining territory – Idlib - witnesses full-scale battle in what is the last territory beyond the hands of the Bashar al-Assad regime. It was not so long ago al-Assad begged for help as he struggled to maintain control over the whole country. But as the battle for the last territory of the country is in full swing there are many lessons to be learnt, a decade on.

The lack of political awareness has cost our brothers and sisters dearly and as a result they were unable to determine who constituted the enemy and who were allies. Whilst the Ba'athist regime was the oppressor its supply lines extended well beyond Syria. Despite the rhetoric from the West against the al-Assad regime Bashar was being wined and dined in Western capitals prior to the uprising. He was being described as a reformer with Hilary Clinton saying al-Assad should be given time in Syria.¹ As a result, many of the rebel groups took Western arms and aid thinking they would aid their cause against the Baathist regime. When in reality they were looking to thwart the uprising.

In 2012 the then Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, in an interview with CNN outlined US policy, he said: *"I think it's important when Assad leaves, and he will leave, to try to preserve stability in that country. The best way to preserve that kind of stability is to maintain as much of the military and police as you can, along with security forces, and hope that they will transition to a democratic form of government. That's the key."*² America's goal was to maintain the regime, with or without al-Assad. The rebel groups that allied with the West were eventually forced to sign truces with the regime, as they were never provided with enough weaponry, and then attend conferences in Riyadh, Geneva, Vienna and Astana and to negotiate with the regime itself.

The direct intervention of the West led by the US had limited impact, as most rebel groups never took US help. Here the US utilised the surrounding regional nations to manage different regions of Syria and the rebel groups fighting within them. Turkey managed the north of Syria and organised many of the defectors of the Syrian military into the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Saudi Arabia armed and funded the Salafi minded groups who were present in the South of Syria. Saudi eventually pushed these groups to integrate into the Vienna talks. Qatar also started backing some of the rebel groups including a coalition known as the Army of Conquest, it even operated a training base for rebels in its territory. It was Qatar that organised the European initiative the 'Friends of Syria' group which was an attempt to start a parallel process to the US, Qatar forced all its rebel leaders to take part, after this initiative failed all the groups joined the Geneva process. Jordan supported rebel groups in the Deraa Governorate including the Southern Front of the FSA. Eventually Jordan reduced its support for group and then armed groups that fought the more Islamic minded rebel groups.

Each of these countries backed certain rebel groups in certain areas, they made sure these groups did not grow outside their areas and the US made sure none of the countries supporting the rebel groups grew too powerful. The rebel groups were only provided with basic weapons, never were they provided with the heavier weapons that would make a difference to, which would not make a difference. This lack of support with heavy weapons eventually forced almost all the rebel groups into truces with the regime as they could not defeat the al-Assad backed militias. The truces included re-locating to Idlib, which is now being bombed. **There is a direct link between the rebel groups and the surrounding nations that got involved.** The more the regional nations got involved in Syria, the more territory the rebel groups lost. These regional nations didn't want to be left out when they saw their rival nations pouring money and arms into Syria. Qatar and Saudi saw Iran's presence as a threat and then these two nations viewed each other as a threat. The US was able to use all these nations for its own goals as these nations only pursued their own limited narrow goals.

In the case of Turkey in the north Syria, the sad reality is the day Turkish forces entered into Syria the rebel groups only lost territory and are now fighting for their lives in Idlib. Turkey cannot look beyond their Kurds and the flow of Muslims into Turkey as this affects Erdogan's positions within Turkey.

The end game in Syria is now taking place and no doubt this will not be the last uprising in the Muslim world and that's why its import lessons are learnt. The most important lesson is despite the loss in Syria, as an Ummah, we just have to get our revolution right once. The enemies of Islam have to succeed every time.

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¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hillary-clintons-uncredible-statement-on-syria/2011/04/01/AFWPEYaC_blog.html

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa/u-s-defense-chief-syria-military-must-remain-intact-when-assad-goes-idUSBRE86T1KP20120730>