



The State Department's "Dissent Memo" and US Options in Syria

By Dr. Radwan Ziadeh
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On June 16, 2016, a dissent memo regarding Syria was filed with the Director of Policy Planning at the US State Department criticizing the Obama Administration's policy on Syria and its failure to bring an end to the war and the disastrous situation in the country. The memo was brought through the 'dissent channel' that was created during the Vietnam War to provide a space in government to voice internal dissent. Signed by 51 diplomats, the letter calls for the use of military force against the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad to put an end to the gruesome five-year Syrian civil war.

It has been five and a half years since the Syrian uprising erupted in March 2011 as Syrians witnessed mass demonstrations spread in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. During this period, the Syrian regime has transformed gradually into a powerful militia waging war against the Syrian people. To maintain his tight grip on power, Bashar al-Assad sought to drain Syria of its financial and human resources, and, more critically, destroy its social fabric by orchestrating an odious sectarian conflict.

The regime has clearly ignored all international norms of war and peace. What started as a peaceful protest movement was suppressed with live bullets, which harvested the souls of Syria's finest youth, such as Ghayth Matar, Hamza Al-Khatib and many others in the prime of life. In the eyes of the regime, no rules of war applied, thus hospitals, residential areas, mosques and churches, have all been targeted as the security branches escalated their brutal crackdown on the civilian population including the use of torture and other inhumane and illegal practices. Therefore, the Syrian people found themselves over the past five years struggling to maintain their resistance to oppression, but also, and more importantly, keep their unity against a policy that aimed at breaking their political cohesion and will.

Syria today is undergoing a transition. Large swathes of territory have been liberated and remain outside the government's access and control. Bashar Al-Assad has transformed from the president of Syria into the mayor of Damascus and some of its suburbs, despite some limited gains after the Russian military intervention in September 2015. Consequently, Assad is unable today to leave his palace without the protection of his militias. Moreover, Assad's loss of control over the border crossings with Turkey and Iraq indicates, in a political sense, that he has lost the ability to maintain his rule over

strategically important geographical areas in the country. Although he is still capable of shelling and burning these places, he has clearly lost the power to regain control over them. Nonetheless, these liberated areas are mostly disconnected geographically and can be easily targeted from the air, which prevents them from becoming safe zones. The absence of a central authority makes it difficult and complicated to manage these areas; and the longer Assad stays barricaded in his palace, the more painful the transition becomes.

These continuing actions by the Assad government have created a power vacuum which has been filled by Al-Qaida and the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL or ISIS). The Islamic State started receiving ample attention from the western media after committing barbaric actions against western journalists, even though they had already committed heinous atrocities against the Syrian people before then, especially in the areas they controlled such as Al-Raqqah, Deir Ez-Zor and Aleppo suburbs. For example, ISIL prevented women from going to schools, closed public facilities, and committed horrific acts in public squares in the name of Islam such as lashing and beheadings of those who disagree with their policies, which was unfortunately the fate of several Syrian human rights and democracy activists.

This is the dilemma that the Syrian people are facing today, trapped between the Assad government’s daily bombardment of their homes and ISIL’s control of their lands and lives. According to the UN, the death toll since the beginning of the Syrian war now exceeds 400,000, in addition to 6 million refugees and 9 million internally displaced persons.

The United States should not allow this humanitarian disaster to continue, and as a global power it has a responsibility to help the Syrian people put an end to this nightmare and explore the prospects for a democratic future. The recent “Dissent Memo” on Syria at the State Department reflects the frustration of American diplomats with the failed policy of the Obama Administration in the last five years.

The memo, which was prepared and submitted through the official "dissent channel" by diplomats involved at different levels of the Syrian “peace process,” calls for "a judicious use of stand-off and air weapons, which would undergird and drive a more focused and hard-nosed U.S.-led diplomatic process." The memo also states that "The moral rationale for taking steps to end the deaths and suffering in Syria, after five years of brutal war, is evident and unquestionable. The status quo in Syria

will continue to present increasingly dire, if not disastrous, humanitarian, diplomatic and terrorism-related challenges."

The air strikes against ISIL focused only on ISIL without taking into consideration the large numbers of civilians killed by Assad's relentless bombardment of the Syrian people. The Obama Administration is not expected to suddenly change its course following the filing of this memo, especially in the last remaining months of Obama's presidency. However, if this memo is taken seriously by the next president, it might propel the incoming American administration to adopt a different strategy to end Assad's rule, contain the conflict, and stop the rise of ISIL.