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Syria: Is the World Waiting for Genocide?

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Cairo — From Nazi Germany to Rwanda, some of the most inhumane atrocities and genocides were committed while the rest of the world was watching. Today we are all witnessing atrocities and mass destruction in Syria. Again we are observing it all unfold before our eyes, with heavy hearts perhaps, but no effective intervention to stop it.

The regime of Bashar al-Assad is brutal. It is fighting a war with its own people, shelling them from the sea, bombing them from the air and murdering them in their own homes. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, more than 40,000 people have so far been killed. More than a million have fled the country, with hundreds of thousands becoming refugees in the bordering countries Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon.

The regime is also extending the destruction to cities of immense historic value. All major cities have been bombed, from Aleppo in the north to Daraa in the south, Homs in the center, and Deir Ezzor in the east.

The situation in Syria today is no longer a political uprising bringing up the tail end of the Arab Spring. Rather, it has become a humanitarian calamity growing bloodier by the day.

We can't afford to stand numb, paralyzed under the cloak of excuses such as "The situation is very complex" or "The regime will ultimately fall" or the one promoted by those whose only interest is keeping the regime in power: "We must allow for diplomatic solutions."

The mission of UN envoys Kofi Annan and Akhbar al-Ibrahimi failed. The Arab League resolutions are ineffective. The UN resolutions are fragmented by the split among the veto-empowered members of the Security Council.

Some leaders think time will solve the problem. Their hope is that Assad's regime will ultimately fall from the heavy toll of the horrors it has spawned. From past experience with such regimes, this scenario is unlikely to happen. Assad, who belongs to the Alawite sect, a minority population in Syria, is still seeking to rule the whole population with an iron fist, including the majority Sunni Muslims. Everything Assad has done so far suggests he will do what it takes to survive, even using chemical weapons in the end. His regime is no different from that of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who leveled and poisoned a whole city, Hama, killing tens of thousands.

Syria is the proud heir of an ancient civilization that has a unique spectrum of minorities that encompasses Muslims and Christians of various denominations. There are at least ten such ethnic and religious groups. For centuries they all lived together peacefully. Now, with the internal war intensifying, this unity is dissolving into a civil and tribal war that not only will end Syria's nationhood, but will also spill over to the rest of the Middle East.

There is little doubt that an unstable Syria will destabilize the whole Middle East. The sectarian turmoil resulting from this tragic conflict will become contagious in neighboring Iraq and Lebanon. The latest event of a car bombing that killed innocent civilians in Lebanon is a warning sign for the looming spillover.

With Assad using the Golan Heights as a "card of fear," Israel may step in. This, in turn, will incite Iran, Hezbollah and possibly Turkey and Egypt to become involved. Already reports indicate that armed groups, including those that are linked to al Qaeda, are finding Syria a fertile ground.

Even China is coming to recognize that chaos in a country that possesses thousands of missiles and huge stockpiles of chemical weapons threatens not only the stability of the Middle East but also the flow of oil to the West and East alike.

In this case, the humanitarian cause and the global interests are indeed aligned.

Syria may appear to be a small country, but it is just the type of entangled conflict that can lead to a world catastrophe. It does not take much imagination to see Syria as the Sarajevo of the 21st century, leading to world war.

The world must act now and collectively. If we have the will, we will find a way. The least we can do immediately is to provide shelter and tangible aid to those fleeing across the borders. In parallel, the superpowers must support on the ground the Syrian free army and impose a no-fly zone, which will cripple the capability of this heartless regime to bomb innocent men and women.

With the Christian holidays weeks away, it would be shameful to celebrate the birth of a man of peace and humanity — whose native language, Aramaic, is still spoken in

Syria's Ma'loula — when genocide instead of brotherly love stalks the very lands he and his disciples roamed millennia ago.

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