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Knowledge for All

Establishing a ‘Military Transition Council’ in Syria

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The present situation in Syria is untenable, intolerable, and therefore unacceptable. The current conditions demand that an end to the stalemate which characterizes the Syrian conflict today must be found. With every passing day, more innocent lives are lost and more needless destruction is inflicted on the country’s infrastructure.

Developments of a diplomatic and military nature have not been able to shift the balance of power in favor of either side in the conflict in a decisive and speedy manner. As the discussions at the recent Munich Security Conference underlined, the international community appears paralyzed. No doubt the regime’s power and control is being gradually “degraded”, which will eventually lead to a final collapse. The Assad regime has lost prestige, credibility, and legitimacy, besides losing power and control on the ground. Yet, the continuation of the present impasse for a prolonged period will not only be very costly for the Syrian people but also have devastating regional consequences where a widespread spillover cannot be ruled out. To prevent this, another approach is desperately needed.

A new approach

What is required is to explore the potential role that could be played by the Syrian military institution to end the present deadlock. In this context, the role played by the Tunisian and Egyptian military institutions in saving their countries from total collapse and disintegration is worth noting. In these two instances, the military establishment sided with, not against the people of their country. In the Syrian case, after the failure of all diplomatic efforts in the past two years, outside parties and the international community as a whole must think seriously about the option of establishing a “Military Transition Council” (MTC), a concept based on the notion of transferring the responsibility of saving Syria to the Syrian military establishment. Such an idea dismisses and challenges the assumptions that most of the Syrian military supports the regime or that all Alawite army officers support the Assad leadership.

After the developments during the past two years since the start of the Syrian popular uprising, and the scale of destruction and death that followed, most of the



Syrian army officers could be ready to be part of a movement to save the country – not saving the regime, and not installing the opposition in power.

Based on such assessment, a call by the international community to adopt the concept of a “Military Transition Council” could not only have wide appeal within Syria but could also serve the interests of internal as well as external players (regional and big powers). Thus, the idea of “transferring power” to the Syrian military institution, under the international community’s supervision and blessing could have a number of positive outcomes.

1. With the Syrian military and most of the serving Syrian army officers convinced that the regime will not be able to survive, a rational calculation will lead most army officers to look for alternatives. Any formula that will provide a reasonable way out is likely to be considered seriously. The military needs to restore its credibility and reputation and to distance itself and its members from the ‘crimes of the regime’. In the atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the Syrian situation now, most army officers are searching for a safe and dignified exit. Hardcore officers who could refuse any compromise and are ready to hold out with the regime’s leadership are very few in number. As most of this group has been at the forefront in leading the bloody conflict, it should be clear that they have no place or role in any future arrangements.
2. An effort by the international community to establish a “Military Transition Council” is likely to cause a split within the Syrian military. Such a split will facilitate the establishment of the proposed Council and will help in the identification of senior army officers who are ready to lead the process of change.
3. The proposal and effort will send an assurance to the military institution that the international community does not consider it as a ‘partner in the regime’s crimes’, and that ‘guilt by association’ cannot be the rule. Instead, the military could be a partner in the regime change process and in stabilizing the country. The main objective here is to isolate the military



institution from the regime. A general assurance could be given (in an unofficial manner) that those army officers who support this proposal will not be treated as criminals and would not be subjected to retribution. (At the same time, a legal process could be initiated later to hold the guilty officers accountable on an individual level).

4. The tragedy of Iraq and the mistakes committed during the occupation of the country back in 2003 must serve as a good lesson to avoid the state of chaos and collapse of security which was produced by the dismantlement of the state's structure and the disbanding of the state military and security institutions. Therefore, steps to preserve the Syrian military and security institutions must be among the priorities in any planning to deal with the Syrian situation.
5. The ruling Alawite minority might find that a military takeover is the best assurance against possible acts of reprisal that could be directed against the Alawite community. Thus, it is possible that the idea of military control will be supported by the Alawite community, and even some Alawite army officers, as well as by all other minorities in the country.
6. Implementing this idea will help in preserving the unity and integrity of the state. Supervision by the military of the change of regime process is a strong assurance against all the forces (internal or external) which could be working for the breakdown of the Syrian state.
7. The proposal will help in establishing control over the arms, ammunition, and military equipment in the country, and prevent the theft and transfer of weapons into the hands of undesirable elements (such as terrorists or criminals) as happened in the case of Iraq and Libya.
8. Realizing this idea will help in preventing extremist and fundamentalist groups from controlling power in Syria and limit their chances of influencing future developments in the country. This would also calm down the fears and concerns of many regional and international players.



9. A role for the military in determining the future developments in the country will offer some reassurance to Syria’s neighbors that the extensive chaos which they are expecting in case of the eventual collapse of the regime may be prevented, or, at a minimum, limited.

As part of a workable proposal, members of the MTC could include the following elements:

- 1) Senior army officers still inside the country, who will declare their readiness to cooperate and announce their revolt against the regime’s leadership
- 2) Senior army officers who announced their defection from the regime, but did not join the rebels
- 3) Senior army officers who are members of the “Free Syrian Army” based inside or outside Syria
- 4) Leaders of selected militias fighting the regime now

It is clear that the establishment or even the announcement of such a project could prove to be a game changer. The impact of this proposal will depend to a great degree on the extent of international and regional support given to the project from the beginning. This includes support from the United States, Russia, the GCC States, Turkey, Iran as well as consent from Israel.

The proposal, no doubt, will still be rejected by certain quarters. To be sure, the regime will do everything possible to undermine the idea. Even the “Free Syrian Army” might reject the idea, or could demand the leadership of the proposed MTC. Extremist groups fighting the regime will likely see this proposal as a strategy to sideline them and challenge their influence. Some external players will undoubtedly try to sabotage the idea if they think that it may not serve their interests.

The bottom line is that the window for an exit strategy in Syria is narrowing. While the involvement of the Syrian military institution in the process of change may not be the ideal option for everyone, the situation inside Syria has reached a very critical point. Diplomatic efforts – local, regional, and international – have so far



met with little success. Without a new approach, it is unlikely that this situation will change. Equally, resolving the matter militarily seems difficult as both the regime and rebels have no overwhelming capability or superiority to secure a decisive military victory.

As a result, there is a need for new ideas based on a new approach. The establishment of an MTC is one proposal that could provide a way out of the current deadlock and help save thousands of innocent lives as well as stop the senseless destruction of the state and society in Syria.