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Expert: Peace for Syria will not come from the outside

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A Free Syrian Army fighter rests with his weapon on a school bench on a street in Aleppo, Syria, Aug. 2. Graffiti shows the name of the brigade: "Ihsan Sadiq fighting group, Amr bin al-Aas brigade of the Free North." (CNS/Reuters/Goran Tomasevic)

Syria's 18-month revolution has already claimed the lives of 20,000 people. What began as an "Arab Spring" rebellion for reform is fast becoming a full-scale civil war of regional, perhaps global significance, according to many observers.

The escalation in fighting in the Syrian cities of Damascus and Aleppo in early August, along with an announcement by former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan that he would resign as special envoy to Syria after his term expired this month, seemed to confirm this view.

To better understand the war in Syria, NCR *spoke with Phyllis Bennis, director of the New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. Bennis has been a writer, analyst and activist on Middle East and U.N. issues for many years. Her numerous books include primers on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the U.S.-Iran crisis, and the U.S. war in Afghanistan. In late June, she authored "Syria: No to Intervention, No to Illusions," an essay widely circulated on the Web. The interview was edited for length and clarity.*

***NCR*: Your essay quoted Kofi Annan who said, "Syria is not Libya, it will not implode, it will explode beyond its borders." What does Annan mean here?**

Bennis: There are essentially three wars being fought in Syria right now. There is a war between the armed opposition, some of which, but not all of which, is being supported by the original democratic, nonviolent opposition in Syria against a repressive regime.

There is a regional war which has national, sectarian components -- a fight for influence between Iran and Syria, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and, in a different direction, Turkey, on the other hand. But this also has a Shia/Sunni component to it that raises the danger of a broader sectarian divide across the region.

And third, you have a global involvement where you have the United States and Russia squaring off over issues of expansion of power, resources and influences in this very strategic region. Just as you have the U.S. refusing to allow the overthrow of the government by a democratic opposition in Bahrain because the U.S. is concerned about maintaining its control of Bahrain's Fifth Fleet, Russia is similarly determined to defend its access to its only military base outside of Russian territory now, which is in the Syrian port of Tartus.

If there is a complete collapse into full-scale civil war in Syria, each of those battles will be escalated.

Does this "third battle" that you describe explain the U.N. Security Council's inability to agree on a resolution for Syria?

Yes. With regard to the Security Council resolution, the mainstream press in the U.S. is reporting that it is all the fault of China and Russia, who three times vetoed "the resolution" against Syria. What [the mainstream media] doesn't mention is that the U.S. and its allies were trying to make the resolution under Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter, which is not only about sanctions, but is the basis on which military force can be authorized. Once your resolution has been taken under Chapter 7, it leaves open the probability that military force can be used. If the resolution had not been taken under Chapter 7, China and Russia might well have opposed it anyway. But we don't know.

What is the U.S. position on Syria?

I think the U.S. position on Syria has everything to do with Iran. Syria is Iran's only serious Arab ally and everything that is done to weaken or undermine Syria is seen as undermining Iran, and that is the goal of the U.S. That is the reason the U.S. is determined to keep the pressure on, to make sure that Iran's ability to find strategic support in an important Arab country is undermined. This position is true as well for Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

I have heard that the opposition within Syria is not cohesive.

It is a very divided and complex movement. There are several parts. In the U.S., we tend to only hear about the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Council. The FSA is a group of very divided militia. Some are soldiers who are defecting with their weapons. Others are civilians who are picking up weapons left behind by the regime when the FSA has captured some bases. And there are just some civilians who are going out with rifles.

There is also indication that there are non-Syrian fighters who have entered Syria to participate in the anti-[President Bashar] Assad movement. They may be operating under the rubric of the FSA. Some of these fighters

appear to be Islamic extremists. It doesn't appear that they are a dominant force in the opposition, but they are certainly a growing force.

The National Syrian Council that we are hearing about, which supports the armed opposition and the refusal to engage in negotiations with the regime, is comprised of people who have been in exile for a long time. Some have a legitimate history of opposing the dictatorship in Syria, but for many, it is far more dubious who these people are and who they represent.

More importantly, in my view, is the part of the opposition which we don't hear about -- the original, democratic nonviolent resistance inside the country. In a recent interview, Charlie Glass [former ABC News chief and author of a book on Syria titled Tribes With Flags: A Dangerous Passage Through the Chaos of the Middle East] said the voice of this democratic opposition, which is opposed to a no-fly zone and foreign military intervention, is being drowned out in the noise of the fighting. Others have said that they are no longer in existence. I don't believe that they have been destroyed. I think they are still there, but their voice is being drowned out. They are also represented by a wide range of organizations across the country. How much unanimity they have is unclear. They don't have the capacity for major unification processes, conferences, etc.

But I think that opposition still exists and remains very important.

At this point, what are the prospects for negotiations?

I think they are very slim. Not impossible. They were certain beginnings made by the U.N. monitoring agency which began at the local level to bring together local commanders and local leaders of the armed opposition to discuss a reduction in violence, to protect civilians, to allow access to humanitarian aid. The report from the Norwegian observer for that mission was cautiously optimistic. Maybe [such an effort] could be expanded, and Syria could build a ceasefire from the bottom up rather than the top down. ...

[The U.S. and its allies] don't want a negotiated settlement that might leave an ambivalent solution in place. They want the defeat of Iran's top Arab ally, despite the fact that they don't necessarily want to engage militarily themselves. ... The U.S. certainly does not want to see a divided Syria. I don't think anybody does. But the idea that the U.S. would intervene at the last minute to save Syria from itself, that is not how it works. The U.S. will invade, or bomb, or send troops, or fighter jets, or whatever, if the U.S. deems it is in U.S. interests, not because of U.S. concerns about what happens to Syria.

What can be done?

There is not a lot that can be done at this point. What can be done is to make sure the U.S. is kept out of Syria militarily. I think it is important to provide moral support for the nonviolent, democratic opposition.

We cannot bring peace to Syria from the outside, and every time the U.S. tries to do that it makes it worse. I think our job here is to stop the U.S. from engaging further in ways that are inevitably going to lead to greater civilian casualties, not fewer. ... A U.S. military intervention in Syria would look much more like Iraq than Libya. That's the danger.

[Claire Schaeffer-Duffy is a freelance writer from Worcester, Mass., and a member of the Sts. Francis and Therese Catholic Worker community there.]

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