

Choke off Tehran's support for Assad

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With the latest news that the Syrian Government has resumed its attack on the city of Homs - almost a month to the day after the UN Security Council endorsed former secretary-general Kofi Annan's Syria peace plan - the Syrian "cease-fire" could at best be described as ineffective. In reality, there never was a true "cease-fire" and it now seems it was more of a gambit by Bashar Assad to buy time to maintain his murderous attacks on defenceless protestors.

When U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in Paris on Thursday last (19 April) with the aim of keeping up the pressure on the Syrian regime, it seemed as though the world was back to square one.

Diplomatic sources revealed that Thursday's meeting - which involved other members of the Friends of Syria group including the foreign ministers of Qatar and Turkey - was intent on sending a "firm message" adding that Kofi Annan's 6 point peace plan was the "last hope" of avoiding a civil war.

Amidst reports that international sanctions targeting Syria have depleted that country's financial reserves by half - even though Damascus is actively trying to evade them - one may wonder how Assad has been able to remain in power.

Russia and China have expressed political support for maintaining the status quo. But for the real answer, we need look no further than Tehran. There are consistent reports of the Iranian regime's unabated financial, military, intelligence and security support for the Assad government seeing it as a major regional ally. The Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei has been overseeing the Syrian situation personally, and General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the notorious Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), has been a regular visitor to Damascus.

The grim reality is that part of the solution lies in pressurizing Tehran on the basis that Syria has been seen as crucial to Iran's regional defensive line for the past three decades.

In that context, and recognising that politics are always local, Tehran understands no clearer language than the threat from the enemy within.

And as the Arab Spring sweeps through the region, Tehran is facing growing domestic isolation, international sanctions and seclusion, and an internecine power struggle at the highest level. Tehran's Mullahs increasingly sense the need to destroy their major opponents and the main Iranian resistance movement, the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) together with their 3,300 supporters in Ashraf and Liberty in Iraq, are at the top of their list.

Tehran's covetous plan against the opposition has been in full swing for the last year. On April 8, 2011, at the behest of the Mullahs', Iraqi armed forces stormed Camp Ashraf, the Iraqi home of civilian members of the PMOI for the past 25 years. As a result, 36 residents, including 8 women, were shot at close range or crushed to death by Iraqi Armed forces. Hundreds were severely wounded.

Subsequently, to evade international censure, the Iraqi government vowed to shut Camp Ashraf with an arbitrary closure deadline of the end of 2011. The threat of another dreadful massacre loomed and, thanks to a massive international campaign, the deadline was postponed. For the last 9 years dozens of prominent US officials from across the political divide have consistently campaigned to guarantee the protection of Ashraf residents. They did so because every Ashraf resident signed an agreement with the US government to voluntarily disarm in 2003 in return for a guarantee of protection until a lasting solution could be found for them to re-establish their lives in safety.

As a result, a Memorandum of Understanding between the UN and the Government of Iraq was agreed and signed on December 25, 2011, and following assurances from both Secretary Clinton and the UN to guarantee the safety and welfare of Ashraf residents, Iranian resistance leader Mrs Maryam Rajavi agreed that some of the residents move to Camp Liberty, a former U.S. military base in Baghdad, where they would be interviewed by the UNHCR as a prerequisite to their transfer to third countries.

Sadly the Iraqis again chose to be duplicitous, turning Camp Liberty into a quasi prison with conditions that did not meet the most basic humanitarian standards.

Four groups of dissidents - 1,600 people in total - moved to the new home, despite all its shortcomings. They showed tremendous fortitude, foregoing many of their fundamental rights by accepting relocation within Iraq to a camp with minimal facilities.

They made their sacrifice and it is now time for the UN and the international community, but especially the U.S., to play their part and keep their promise.

The dissidents' human rights -together with their property rights, including their homes and possessions - must be maintained. Iraq must recognize the status of Ashraf and Camp Liberty residents as asylum seekers and respect their rights under international law.

The UN must also recognize Camp Liberty as a refugee camp designed as a stopping-off point for the PMOI. Instead, it is designated a "Temporary Transition Location," which deprives the residents of many of their most basic humanitarian needs.

Supporting Iranian dissidents is no longer simply a humanitarian issue for the West. It should also be seen as an integral part of the strategy of aiding the democratic opposition, both inside and outside Iran to overthrow Tehran's tyrannical rule. Tightening the noose around the Mullah's necks would also have a direct effect on Syria and lessen Assad's ability to terrorise the population of that unfortunate country.

Finding a solution to the Syrian situation without taking Tehran's destructive role into account could be likened to completing a jigsaw without the requisite pieces; initially frustrating, but finally, impossible.