

## If Trump accepts the status quo, Assad will stay

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**The News on Sunday:** Can we link whatever is happening in Syria today with the Arab Spring?

**Ahmed Rashid:** Syria was the last country to erupt in demonstrations in order to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. There was an immediate reaction from the Assad regime to crush the demonstrations. Remember these were multi-ethnic multi-religious demonstrations — Muslims demonstrating with Christians, with Kurds. One of the centers, of course, was Aleppo itself where some of the strongest protest movements took place. And these demonstrators were not armed.

**TNS:** What were the demonstrators seeking — democracy?

**AR:** They were basically seeing the overthrow of Assad. Syria had been through a huge economic crisis for two-three years before the Arab Spring. There had been a drought; farming had collapsed and a lot of young peasants had come into the cities. These formed the backbone of the first demonstrations because they had lost their jobs, their farms. Now they were in the cities and they were not trained for any kind of job. So, you had a very severe economic crisis.

Almost immediately when the demonstrations started, there was this problem of provocative firing on the demonstrations by the secret police.

**TNS:** How did it pan out in the subsequent years and when did the international involvement begin?

**AR:** The international involvement came much later. First there were these local demonstrations. Then some of the demonstrators took up weapons. The first infiltration that took place was of extremist groups, particularly from Iraq — al-Qaeda and the remnants of Islamic State. They had roots in Syria — an underground network. The extremists were in the best position to take advantage of these uprisings. Not long before these democratic or anti-Assad but not violent organisations could organise themselves, the extremists were already there.

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Very quickly, it became a war led by some of these extremists groups which were backed by the Arab states. For example, we know that Jabal Al Nusra is backed by Saudi Arabia. So, well before the West arrives in any kind of role to create a Syrian moderate opposition, we already have Arab states backing extremists groups. So the extremist groups were at a great advantage.

Now the West arrives and they try and create what is called the Free Syrian Army — a collection of moderate groups — which includes Syrian Kurds and other minorities, such as Christians and others. But the US in particular and Nato countries provided only enough weaponry and money to prevent the annihilation of these groups, but not enough money and weapons for them to actually achieve victory.

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**TNS:** Now it has been understood as an international game being played in Syria by the Western powers vis-a-vis Russia. So, apart from regime change, what other interests did the US or Europe have in the Middle East?

**AR:** The tragedy of Syria is that now it involves so many countries directly. On one side you have Russians and the Iranians where Iranians have mobilised their militias from Lebanon, also Pakistan and Afghanistan. On the other side are the Arab states that are backing different players inside Syria, and then you've got the West. This massive international involvement means that any resolution has to come out of meetings of all these states.

**TNS:** But you are saying the initial uprising against Assad was entirely homegrown?

**AR:** I think yes. The extremists came in later when the uprising had dissolved into violence. It was Assad's mistake to use troops and assassins and snipers. They were firing at peaceful demonstrations. Remember the West was bogged down in trying to secure and stabilise Iraq. Nobody was particularly interested in trying to destabilise Syria. Some of the local states had hated Assad, of course, which include the Saudis. The Wahabi regimes — Qatar and Saudi Arabia — hated Assad for what his father had done by destroying the Muslim Brotherhood. But you can't say that the instigation was done by outsiders.

My first contention is that you got to have some international understanding and it is extremely difficult now to bring these two broad-based alliances of countries together. There are so many countries and so many different interests. Afghanistan is a landlocked country with five-six countries interfering in Afghanistan. Syria is ten times worse than Afghanistan.

The main problem is that if there is a deal with Trump, as he is saying he will unite with the Russians to fight ISIS and they will leave Assad in power, what about the Iranians?

**TNS:** That looks like a paradox. On the one hand the US under Trump is going to side with Russia and bring peace in Syria but at the same time it is opposed to Iran?

**AR:** Remember that Iran has made all this headway into the Arab world for the first time since the revolution in 1979. It's not going to give up its commanding position in Iraq. Iranian-backed militias and commandos are in Mosul now and they are in the lead of the war. Iranians are not going to give up their powerful position in Syria where even if the Russians withdrew, these Iranian militias are going to stay. They will be the force on the ground.

How do you deal with this Iranian conundrum? There's a dilemma over Iran. It is in a very expansive mood and position in the Middle East. That's why all Arab regimes are very anti-Obama. Because they see the US administration has surrendered too many concessions to Iran. And now the

nuclear deal is not a very big issue. The Arabs are saying that the nuclear deal is a done deal. We're not going to mess around [that] but America has to stop this interference of Iran in the Arab world. And the Americans don't have the clout to do that. The Russians don't either because even though Iran is an ally of Russia, why would Iranians necessarily listen to the Russians? Iranians have a direct physical stake in the Middle East, unlike the Russians who have a geo-political strategic state but no desire to actually occupy Arab territory.

**TNS:** One consequence has been that it is now increasingly understood that the Middle East is now cut across sectarian lines. How do you look at it?

**AR:** Very briefly, the initial Arab Spring brought all the sectarian, ethnic, and religious groups together everywhere, whether it was Egypt or Tunisia. It was only later that in each country extremism entered the political picture and they tried to take the leadership of the movement. In Syria, of course, the action of the regime gave no time for the moderate opposition to develop.

Certainly, what we are now seeing is an inevitable fragmentation of the Middle East. To expect Syria to reconfigure as a state that it was I think is impossible. It is going to take years for Iraq to re-conquer all the areas that are now under control of Islamic State.

In the meantime, we're seeing these ethnic and sectarian enclaves: the Kurds, extremist groups, the opposition to Assad. The Sunnis in Iraq are opposed to the Shia majority. It is a very complex situation. I'm pessimistic. We're going to see further fragmentation in the entire region.

**TNS:** In this situation, it still looks like the Assad regime is going to stay?

**AR:** If Trump accepts the status quo, which is that Assad stays and he has a deal with the Russians, that Assad stays and they would fight ISIS together, then certainly Assad will stay. He has won the war.

**TNS:** What about the civil war because the rebels still control parts of Syria?

**AR:** Yes, as I said, the war won't end but Assad will be in the driving seat. He will have taken back the important heartland of Syria — the major cities, the coastlines on the Mediterranean.

**TNS:** What about the Kurds. That brings us to the role of Turkey.

**AR:** Once the new American regime works with Russia and accepts Assad, the Kurds will declare a separate state. That will be part of the fragmentation that will develop because the Kurds will see this as a betrayal by the Americans and by everyone. And of course then Turkey will react to that in a vicious way. Turkey will not tolerate a separate Kurdish state anywhere.

**TNS:** Why is it that Assad has still managed to stay?

**AR:** I think the international factor has been critical. The fact is that the Russians were prepared to use the air force, the Iranians had prepared their soldiers and militias to fight on the ground while the Americans and the Arab states were not prepared to do that. The Americans are still supplying Kalashnikovs to the Free Syrian Army while the Russians are providing heavy artillery and everything to Assad's forces.

**TNS:** If there was to be a solution what in your opinion it could be? What should ideally be the solution?

**AR:** The ideal solution would be that all the states should reconfigure at their existing borders. But frankly, what Daesh has done is that it has eliminated the borders between Iraq and Syria, and it did that four years ago when it first launched itself and took Raqa and Mosul in Iraq and took these towns in Syria. Unfortunately, the elimination of the colonial border, the Skyes-Picot border made by the British and the French in the 1920s, is only going to bring even more fragmentation.

**TNS:** Is there any role for the UN to play?

**AR:** I still believe that the UN can. Only the UN has the potential to bring in countries together in some kind of peace agreement where everybody's peace interests are matched. The Americans are a player in this; they are arming one side. Why would the Russians accept the Americans? And why would the Americans accept the Russians as a moderator? I think you need a neutral moderator. But the UN under Ban Ki-moon has been very weak. He has been a weak secretary general. He has avoided entering the Middle East.

I think ultimately there has to be a patchwork solution in the Middle East. The UN should play a role. I think the new UN chief is going to be more effective.

**TNS:** What is the sectarian complexion of this Free Syrian Army?

**AR:** They are basically Sunnis. They have been backed by the Kurds which the Americans have brokered. Even though the Sunnis don't like the Kurds and don't trust them, the Kurds have become the main fighting force for the Free Syrian Army because they are well-trained and armed by the Americans. The Syrian Sunni forces are very fragmented. So the Kurds have become the main fighting force. Of course, many people accused the US for backing Kurds so that eventually there would be a Kurdistan. But the fact is that Kurds are secular; they hate ISIS and they hate Assad. It is much easier mobilising them.

Remember Syria was the heart of the Roman empire, the Christian world, the Muslim world. You've got minorities in Syria that go back to two to three thousand years. It was a multi-religious, ethnic, sectarian state. The fact is that these rulers were dictators but they were secular and allowed all these ethnic, sectarian groups to flourish. It's now that all the Christians are leaving this region, whether it is Iraq or Syria.

**TNS:** There has been a major refugee crisis in Syria and for the world.

**AR:** It has swamped Europe and Europe doesn't know what to do. ISIS and its people are able to infiltrate refugees also. Then don't forget all these economic migrants on the back of all these genuine kind of refugees. The more this happens, the more these states are going to stop taking them in. And then they are going to become a bigger danger because they will be jobless and militancy will develop even more.

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