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Syria intervention is only a matter of time

By Emile Nakhleh

It is time for the west to help the Syrian opposition remove Bashar al-Assad's regime and save the Syrian people from further slaughter. If the west fails to support Syria's opposition immediately, the city of Homs – and its population of more than 1m people – will face the fate of its sister city Hama, which was destroyed by Mr Assad's father Hafez 30 years ago.

Many will say we should harden our hearts in the interests of realpolitik. Certainly, in Syria's calculus, the west is hesitant to intervene militarily because the regime's stability is important in the midst of the heated war rhetoric between Iran and Israel.

In the long run, however, hastening the demise of another Arab dictator can only be good for the region. Ousting Mr Assad would put an end to a rising regional cold war between Iran and Sunni Arab states. More immediately significant, the regime is doomed. Although the US, UK and western powers are not inclined to repeat the Libyan intervention of 2011, they cannot avoid being haunted by the Bosnian massacres of the mid-1990s when the west all but stood by and watched. Just how many thousands of innocent Syrian civilians will have to be killed before the west is driven morally to save the rest of the Syrian people?

Let us remember that the protests, like their counterparts last year, started peacefully. However, the regime, like others before it, resorted to force to silence the opposition. Those regimes failed. Mr Assad and his elite are out to prove they can draw a line under the "Arab spring", believing Syria is exceptional and the regime too important geostrategically to fail. He fails to appreciate that the Arab authoritarian narrative has run its course and that a new sense of people power has gripped Arab publics.

When I was at the CIA, my analysts and I briefed policymakers on how Mr Assad used repression to maintain stability. Then only a few brave human rights advocates were willing to meet us in Damascus, despite the threats of arrests and torture. Now it seems everyone has lost their fear of the security apparatus. They have also rejected the regime's claims that "foreign elements" and "terrorists" are behind the uprising.

What seems clear is that the longer the regime stays in power, the bloodier its end will be. Syria is already in the midst of a civil war and the opportunity for a peaceful resolution is long gone. Iran, Hizbollah, Russia, and China, for different interests, support the Assad regime. The first three are particularly invested in its survival. For Russia, Syria is the last Arab state that looks to it as a principal benefactor. Iran views Syria as its outlet to the Arab world, an extension of Shia Iraq and a tool in its competition with Sunni Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia. As for Hizbollah, it cannot function as a regional “resistance group” without its links to Syria and through Syria to Iran. The Assad regime is a critical side of this triangle; its demise will break the triangle apart. This explains why Hizbollah’s al-Manar satellite television has barely covered the Arab spring in Syria.

Yet despite the vetoes of Russia and China in the UN Security Council, the General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn the brutality. This should provide the west and regional players with the cover to help Syria’s opposition.

So what should be done? The assistance should begin with establishing a haven for the opposition and the military personnel who defect from the regime, as in northern Iraq in 1991. Food, water, clothes, medical supplies and technical equipment should be dropped into the safety zone. Ankara would have to play a critical role in planning, and ultimately in maintaining and supplying the zone, as it would almost certainly have to be contiguous to Turkey.

If Syrian forces violate the sanctuary, the west should arm the opposition and work with military defectors to organise more effective resistance. If that fails to deter the regime’s brutality and more deaths occur, the west should consider putting a limited number of “boots on the ground”, beginning with the “liberated” zone.

While this is, of course, complicated and hazardous, humanitarian interventions always seem so in advance. Sooner or later the number of casualties will be such that the west is compelled to act. It should do that now rather than wait.

The writer is former director of the CIA Political Islam Strategic Analysis Programme and author of ‘A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America’s Relations with the Muslim World’

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