Syrian Conflict and the Crisis in Ukraine - the Proof of US Duplicity

The successful resistance Damascus has shown to the forces of internal opposition, backed by neighboring countries and Western powers has started to gradually move the tides in favor of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It would seem that three years of war against terrorists and mercenaries, along with enduring the sanctions imposed by the West and a number of Arab countries, would have caused the Assad regime to collapse, despite the support Russia and Iran had been giving it. But as of now there’s no implications that his rule in Damascus can be effectively compromised, one way or another.

Washington, Riyadh and Doha, along with a number of high-profile French diplomats, predicted the imminent fall of the Syrian government and members of the Syrian opposition couldn’t wait to witness it firsthand. How surprisingly naive were the assumptions that the Assad regime would collapse like a house of cards, and detachments of armed rebels would succeed in breaking through the defensive lines of Damascus.

And now, three years later, despite hundreds of thousands dead or missing, despite the fact that millions of Syrians have become refugees, despite the incalculable damage to the Syrian economy, the country and its legitimate authorities are still standing tall. And Bashar Assad is not going anywhere. Moreover, he is preparing for the presidential elections, provoking outbursts of anger among the ranks of the Syrian opposition and his external enemies who reckon that these elections will provide his rule even more legitimacy. The Syrian army is pursuing new victories, and now the opposition’s actions are mainly limited to negotiating for escape routes for the remnants of its militants, as was the case last week with a symbolic recapture of the “capital of the revolution” – the city of Homs.

Apparently, the success of Bashar al-Assad can be explained by two factors.

First — it was definitely affected by a strategic decision of the US not to seek the direct military overthrow of the regime, as it did with Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. The American think tanks knew that a military operation in Syria may well become another shameful American fiasco in the region. And with the support of Moscow and Tehran, it seems that Damascus is quite capable of withstanding a joint effort by regional players, led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

The second reason is an error made by the two Wahhabi states blinded by anger and hatred – Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Those monarchies had been providing substantial financial support to the groups of radical Islamists and terrorists fighting the Assad regime in Syria. Over time the connection of these groups with “Al-Qaeda” became apparent and was later proved. In addition, the excessive ambitions of these two monarchies and their mutual rivalry over their spheres of influence in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, led to a violent conflict between the anti-
Syrian coalition parties. And then these two tried to start a new war in Iraq, without finishing “their business” in Syria.

The conflict that was initially a power struggle between the Alawite ruling minority and majority Sunni population has evolved into a confrontation between a moderate power and radical terrorist movements that are after the creation of an Islamic state in Syria with all the attributes of Shariah rule.

This situation resulted in the involvement of the Arab and even European youth recruited by Wahhabi preachers to seek death in Syria. This, in turn, has caused panic in the West, since the situation can easily backfire mimicking the bloody events in Afghanistan. At a recent emergency meeting of European leaders the agenda was measures to counter the flow of Islamicists. Thus they admitted that they had miscalculated the possible fallout of the Syrian conflict.

On top of it all, the CIA head John Brennan, stated: “We are concerned about the use of Syrian territory by “Al-Qaeda” as a recruiting ground, this creates conditions for terrorist attacks in Syria and may potentially turn Syria into a stronghold of terrorism”.

Of course, this does not mean that the West has completely abandoned the idea of overthrowing the Assad regime. This issue was to be discussed at the meeting of the “Friends of Syria”, which was held in London on 15 May. Whatever they may have come with, against the current political and diplomatic background Assad is close to securing his success in the suppression of a rebellion provoked by Wahhabi money.

Another reason for Assad’s success was the failure of the NATO- Wahhabi coalition to cause a split in his entourage. Initially, some members of the ruling class in Damascus turned their backs on the Syrian government, as did, for example, the former Prime Minister Riyad Hijab and the military generals Habib Ali and Manaf Tlass. When this happened the French foreign minister gleefully prophesied “mass desertion” in the Syrian ranks, in turn the opposition stated that these “defectors” was a sign of imminent collapse of the regime. But this phenomenon has not become widespread, the majority of political and military elite remained loyal to Assad, thus the consequences of the betrayal of a dozen former regime figures in political and military terms were not very significant.

This failure on planning and calculation made by the Western and Arab intelligence services became particularly noticeable against the background of the fact that the methods of forced overthrow of government by fomenting internal strife and controversy has long been a common practice in the Arab world, Africa and Latin America. Yet three years later, despite a considerable international isolation of Assad and socioeconomic difficulties, opponents of the regime have not been able to win sympathies with Assad’s supporters in order to overthrow the President. This fact shows the degree of loyalty and strength of the elite that is still in power in Damascus.

On May 5 the US State Department announced that it is going to recognize the Council of the Syrian opposition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and provide it with the status of a foreign mission. The US government has also issued a request to Congress for the approval of a 27 million dollar supply of “non-lethal aid”. Moreover, on May 13, Barack Obama met with the head of the Syrian National Coalition Forces Ahmad Jarba at the end of his week-long visit to Washington, during which the Syrian delegation was officially recognized as a foreign diplomatic mission. The Obama’s administration has officially stated that “President Obama welcomed the activities of Ahmad Jarba as the leader of the Syrian opposition and its constructive approach to the dialogue with the government of Bashar al-Assad”. Obama has also called on the Syrian opposition to consider the creation of a transitional government which will represent all the Syrian political forces. During his meeting with Obama, Ahmad Jarba started to discuss the possibility of delivering man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to the opposition groups. He voiced bluntly these intentions to the journalists of the Wall Street Journal on May 11. He even said that he would be handing those MANPADS over to the elite groups of specially trained opposition fighters, that have deserted the Syrian army and are capable of using anti-tank launchers. At the same time, the opposition leader approves the deliveries of MANPADS as from the United States directly as well as through other countries with the approval of the US administration.

“Our mission is to persuade the US to give us a weapon or to convince them to allow our friends to provide us with it,” said the head of the Syrian National Coalition Forces. “We’re after getting a limited amount of those and we will be using those very selectively”.

But the problem is the supply of MANPADS to rebels is prohibited by a number of international conventions.

Before meeting Obama, Ahmad Jarba met on May 12 with the representatives of the Pentagon, and even earlier with
the US Secretary of State John Kerry. During the meeting, the head of the State Department said that “Washington intends to seek a peaceful solution to the crisis in Syria”.

The Obama administration still has not officially gave its consent to the shipments of MANPADS to the Syrian opposition, since it fears that those launchers may fall into the hands of insurgents and then be used for terrorist attacks.

“We have not changed our position,” said White House National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan. “We have made very clear publicly our concerns about this particular system because it has a proliferation risk that does not serve our interests”.

At the same time the US intelligence services along with Saudi ones have already provided the Syrian opposition with a supply of weapons designed to combat armored vehicles, in particular, more than 20 portable anti-tank BGM-71 TOW missiles. These launchers were sent to Syria back in March through Turkey and Jordan.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while paying no heed to Washington's games and the petty attempts of the National Syrian Coalition to affect the situation, spoke in support of national reconciliation “wherever possible to achieve success”. According to him, “the Syrian government will continue to fight terror and at the same time to strengthen the process of national consensus in the name of the speedy return of security and stability in all regions”. While speaking with the delegation of public and religious circles of the province of Hama in Damascus on May 11, President Assad said that Syria “is moving to victory thanks to the heroism of the army and the resistance of its people”. In turn the Syrian media reported the release of 382 former gang members who had voluntarily surrendered their weapons near Damascus, Homs, Idlib and Deir ez-Zor.

Following the successful operation of prisoner exchanges in Aleppo and Latakia which ran in parallel with the withdrawal of militants from the old quarters of Homs, the Syrian government has reached an agreement on the release of 1500 families that were held hostage by armed groups in the industrial zone of Adra, 40 km from Damascus. According to the news source “Al-Watan” the head of the People’s Reconciliation Commission Sheikh Jaber Issa, the prisoners belonged to different religious communities. According to him, each family will be exchanged for a detainee militant that was imprisoned by the authorities. At the second stage of the exchange, as Sheikh Isa expects, there will be a release from captivity of the Syrian soldiers held in Duma, 12 km from Damascus.

A new cease-fire and disarmament agreement was reached in the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk in the south of the capital, said the head of the Reconciliation Commission. He expressed the hope that the militants of the extremist factions would finally leave the camp and they would be returned to its residents. All peaceful initiatives in this camp had been broken repeatedly since February by the provocations of the Jabhat Al-Nusra militants.

At the front, south of Damascus fierce fighting continues in the area of Quneitra and Al-Qahtani in the demilitarized zone on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Surya news reported the deaths of 150 Islamists and mercenaries. According to military sources, among the dead are Saudis, Jordanians and Pakistanis.

Despite all this the presidential election campaign continues in Syria. Its launch was officially announced on May 11, and the elections are scheduled for June 3. Three politicians are running for president, including the sitting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. His political opponents both represent the so-called loyal opposition. First of them is 46-year-old Communist from Aleppo Maher Abdul-Hafiz Hajjar, another one is a 54-year-old Liberal businessman Hassan bin Abdullah al-Nour, the head of the National Initiative for Reforms.

Some analysts believe that US efforts are aimed at calming the opposition down before the elections in Syria. And then, after the elections are over, the White House will not recognize its results. Washington is trying to show its ability to determine the development of the situation in Syria while they are fighting Russian interests in Ukraine. It is obvious that the recognition of the Syrian National Coalition Forces as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people will do no good in the settlement of the conflict. However, such measures may only further complicate the resolution of the Syrian crisis, and they are in sharp contrast with the efforts of the international community to achieve a truce.

One thing is certain, there can be no peaceful solution for Syria without any form of cooperation between the US and Russia, but as of now, those will apparently be moving towards even greater confrontation due to the situation in Ukraine. If the parties should reach a dead end or should they stand their ground fiercely, this will inevitably affect the prospects of cooperation over the Syrian crisis.

Some Western analysts believe that the issues of Syria and Ukraine can become two “bargaining chips” in the pocket
of the United States. After all, if Washington is not be able to contribute to a solution in Syria, Obama can begin losing the confidence of his “allies”, until the point of their complete and total frustration.

As for Syria, the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine has led to a deterioration of Russia’s relations with the West, but at the same time it contributed to the strengthening of Russia’s ties with Syria, providing Damascus with additional negotiating advantages in trade with the West.

It is obvious that the situation in Syria is linked to the crisis in Ukraine, but the US and other Western countries fail to acknowledge that the situation in Ukraine has reached a deadlock. This means that the West now has to fight two fronts, with the Syrian problem unresolved and the unfolding military operations in close proximity to Russia. Now it is difficult to predict exactly how the Ukrainian crisis will affect the resolution of the Syrian problem, but one thing is certain: the crisis in Ukraine and the conflict in Syria are two monsters brought up by Washington, and those would remain a concern for all parties involved. National separatism, ethnic conflicts and the violation of a pre-existing geopolitical balance will have long-term negative consequences for the entire world.

Vladimir Simonov, Middle Eastern Expert, Ph. in History, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.