Iran’s Solution to the Syrian Problem

An event important to a solution of the Syrian problem was held in Tehran on November 18 and 19: About 200 representatives of the Syrian government led by National Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar met with various opposition groups, religious leaders and foreign guests from Lebanon, Turkey, Sudan, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Brazil and Nicaragua in the Istiqlal hotel complex.

It should be noted that 130 people representing 40 political parties and social movements came from Syria, and the group included a most powerful force — the National Coordinating Committee. The meeting was also attended by delegates from the Social Democratic Party, the Secular Democratic Party, the Independent Youth Forum, the Kurdish Nationalist Party and the National Salvation Front, as well as clerics and several tribal leaders. Among them were Christians and Sunni Muslims, Druze and Alawites. About 40 people from the external Syrian opposition attended.

The event was called the Syrian National Dialogue. It opened with a minute of silence for those who had perished. Then Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi spoke and said Tehran stands ready to provide all possible assistance to the democratic processes taking place in that country in order to “restore peace and stability in Syria.”

According to Iran, the tragic events in Syria are the result of interference by the West and other players in the country’s internal affairs, and that is contributing to violence on an ever-widening scale. It would be more advisable to initiate a comprehensive national dialogue involving various forces and sectors of Syrian society, religious figures, political leaders and social movements, as well as representatives of various ethnic and religious minorities. Only then would all those involved in the armed conflict observe a truce.

Of course, conditions in Syria remain extremely difficult due to the unilateral economic and financial sanctions. Humanitarian assistance is clearly needed, not just for refugees and displaced persons but also for a broader section of the local populace. Given the current situation, the government is prepared to implement political, economic and social reforms. But the reforms must take the culture and traditions of the Syrian people into account and be implemented without external interference.

The following facts bear witness to Iran’s role in resolving the Syrian problem:

a) This past summer 30 countries exchanged views on the issue in Tehran;

b) Iran has given a great deal of support to the mission of Lakhdar Brahimi, the Special Representative of the United Nations and the League of Arab States (LAS);

c) Iran supported Egyptian President Mohammed Mursi’s initiative; as a result, experts at the (deputy) foreign minister level from Iran, Turkey and Egypt met in New York;

d) Tehran developed its own plan for resolving the Syrian crisis that involved an end to the violence, a comprehensive national dialogue and preparations for new parliamentary and presidential elections free of any pressure. The plan was submitted to the UN and the political leaders of Russia, Syria, Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.
There can be no doubt that Iran is assisting the Syrian people on a massive scale. For one thing, Syrians injured during the protracted armed conflict are receiving medical treatment in Iran. Iran is meeting Syria’s needs for medicines and medical technology, and its experts are repairing and helping to operate the country’s electrical grid.

A distinctive feature of the Tehran meeting was that Iran avoided intervening in the internal Syrian dialogue. It limited itself to the role of an observer with no influence on decisions. However, the very fact that the meeting took place indicated that Iran is involved in resolving the Syrian crisis.

As an important additional factor, those participating in the meeting decided not to speak for the Syrian people. That facilitated the following joint statement:

- The situation in Syria has reached the point of deep crisis, and it threatens all Syrians;
- The situation urgently demands a comprehensive dialogue to end the crisis at minimal cost and with minimum losses;
- The Syrians must initiate the political process themselves without foreign intervention in order to achieve comprehensive democratic change through peaceful means.

Those participating in the meeting condemned various forms of terrorism, ethnic separatism and other violence. They were particularly alarmed about interference by individual countries in Syria’s internal affairs. These countries have not limited themselves to political pressure and have imposed tough financial and economic sanctions against Syria. They stand prepared to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad by force under certain conditions. Therefore, the conference demanded the immediate lifting of unilateral sanctions and the rendering of significant amounts of humanitarian assistance to Syria in the areas of food, energy and healthcare.

The Syrian National Dialogue emphasized the need to build an atmosphere of trust among the Syrian people. To do so requires that a huge number of problems involving people that have been arrested or abducted be solved; that it become possible to deliver humanitarian assistance to affected areas by, among other things, opening transportation routes; and that government institutions function normally.

The participants made an urgent appeal to the leaders of Iran and the BRICS member countries to limit Ankara’s interference in Syria. They believe that Turkey, along with several other countries, including the Arab monarchies, are actively supporting the armed opposition by providing training; supplying weapons, military equipment and funding; and giving medical assistance. That is a violation of international law and an infringement on Syria’s national sovereignty.

Syrian National Reconciliation Minister Ali Haidar said during the meeting that the national dialogue process begun in Tehran would continue in Damascus. A special 16-person committee has been formed to get it started. It will be expanded later by adding other political parties, social movements and groups.

All of this convinces me that the Tehran meeting was fundamentally different from the previous meetings held under the direction of the West, Turkey and the Arab monarchies. In those meetings, it was immediately announced that Assad had to be removed from power. That made dialogue within Syria simply impossible. In addition, no more than 20% of the Syrian people were represented. And it could not have been otherwise, because the external opposition, which participated in the meetings, has no significant influence within the country.

It is also noteworthy that Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi stated that Iran intends to continue working to engage the new Syrian opposition movements and groups in the national dialogue process.

Thus, despite many claims by Western countries and some neighboring countries, Iran is helping to resolve the Syrian crisis. I want to believe that the national dialogue process will continue and will result in the domestic political situation becoming stabilized. Otherwise, the growing chaos will embroil all of the neighboring countries, and that will cause the security climate throughout the Middle East to deteriorate sharply.

Vladimir Yevseyev is a columnist for New Eastern Outlook; Parviz Nemati is a journalist working for the Russian Service of the Voice of Iran.