

Syria: It's Not a 'Civil War' This Is a Foreign Aggression

On July 29, Christine Bierre, of the French newspaper Nouvelle Solidarité, interviewed Dr. Bassam El-Hachem, professor at the Lebanese University in Beirut, and a leading figure in Gen. Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Tendency (Courant Patriotique Libre/CPL). The interview was translated from French.

Nouvelle Solidarité: After the battles in Damascus and Aleppo, in Europe we have the impression that since then, the Syria situation is sliding toward civil war. Isn't that the case?

El-Hachem: This so-called civil war in Syria resembles what people are familiar with from Lebanon, as of 1975. Then, too, they said that what was happening in Lebanon was a civil war, to make believe that only the Lebanese were involved, when, with few exceptions, essentially, it was a multinational war which took place within the confines of the territory of Lebanon.

Today in Syria, the game strangely resembles the Lebanese situation back then, but with one major difference: In Syria, the regime has stayed in place, whereas in Lebanon at the time, the army was neutralized from the beginning, leading to the State's becoming marginalized, which in turn, left the various factions to face off in conflict. Whether the Western powers want to acknowledge it or not, there is, on one side, a State: a regime of legitimate authorities, a regular armed forces, regular security services, all supported by the majority of the Syrian population, all the communities, all mixed up together—Alawites, Christians, Druze, and above all, a large part of the Sunnis.

Opposite them, there is a peaceful civilian opposition, which has always expressed itself, and which has aimed at change from the beginning, but which today is becoming marginalized by the conflict which has been transformed into armed confrontation; there are, first of all, the militarized forces, armed, financed, and trained by foreign powers, notably Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, and with support and military



Dr. Bassam El-Hachem

staff from the United States, Israel, and Turkey.

So, it's illegitimate to qualify what's happening in Syria as a civil war. *This is a foreign aggression led by proxies, interposed between the State and the Syrian people.* The regime, with all the military and political means at its disposal, is reacting to the

best of its ability in order to safeguard the stability and unity of the State.

NS: How does the situation stand in Damascus, since the recent battles?

El-Hachem: That's over! This aggression is completely contained. There may still be some small pockets of resistance here or there, in the villages, in the hills and valleys of the Province of Damascus, but they are extremely marginal phenomena, which the security forces and Syrian Army will finish eliminating, with the least possible injury to the civilian population.

Popular Support for the Government

NS: Thierry Meyssan [a French journalist] described, since [the battle in] Damascus, the failure of the Western strategy, which counted on the assassination of four high-level Syrian figures, to create a division in the government, and the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Nothing of the sort came about, with the population supporting the government; 4,000 mercenaries were killed, and 3,700 apprehended...

El-Hachem: It's difficult to confirm the numbers, since it could be more or less than the figures cited. What's for sure, is that the population there supported the Syrian armed forces. That's what happened in Da-

masculus and the same thing is happening in Aleppo.

That is especially important, since Damascus and Aleppo are the major rallying centers for the Sunni community, particularly the Sunni bourgeoisie in Syria. Up to now, these two cities haven't budged. Why? Because the Sunni bourgeoisie supports the government, contrary to what the country's enemies unduly claim. To the extent that hostilities escalate, people end up understanding that this is a foreign war against Syria, decked out in the finery of a resistance movement against a dictatorial, authoritarian regime. They understood that this is no more than a deception, and that the warlords served the interests of all the powers, except those of Syria itself.

NS: Everyone knows that in Syria, there was a peaceful opposition in the past, both under the reign of Bashar al-Assad, and in the time of his father Hafez al-Assad, and a number of the historic figures of this opposition paid a heavy price for their courage in the face of the regime, in prison terms and persecutions. Do you think these people have ceased to exist?

El-Hachem: No. I'm just saying that with the unleashing of the armed conflict, until further notice, these folk no longer have anywhere to exercise their abilities. Because the true opposition knows that eventual change in Syria will never stem from violence, which instead, puts the unity of the Syrian people, the country, and the Syrian State at risk; but even though negotiation and dialogue between the government and the opposition is what all those who truly love Syria hope and pray for, in the prevailing conditions today, naturally, the only thing that they can do is keep a low profile, awaiting better days when dialogue will resume its rightful place.

NS: [Former Lebanese Prime Minister] General Aoun stated in *L'Orient le Jour* some days back, in a somewhat provocative manner, that the end of the Assad regime would be the downfall of democracy, and he particularly lashed out at the Salafist movement, Hezb el-Tahrir, whose charter affirms that Sharia is against democracy. Why this line?

El-Hachem: General Aoun did not say that the Syrian regime was a democratic regime.¹ He said that between this regime and the others in the region, this one is a whole lot closer to democracy than the others.

1. General Aoun fought the Syrian occupation of Lebanon from March 1989 until he was exiled to France in 1990. He returned to his country in May 2005. Dr. El-Hachem's 1990 report on the Lebanon war to the Schiller Institute in Leesburg, Va., appeared in *EIR*, Nov. 16, 1990.

Do human beings have more rights in Saudi Arabia, in the United Arab Emirates, or in Qatar, than in Syria? We recently saw a young Tunisian get his throat slit. For having had the "presumptuousness" of converting to Christianity, he was publicly dismembered, in a ritual manner, by a Salafist group which arrogated to itself the right to execute men in the name of Allah.

What did we see in Libya? We were promised democracy and what do we witness now? The destruction of Libyan unity, on behalf of an ensemble of gangs, clans, armed tribes, and a latent state of war among them, which the dictatorial Qaddafi regime had previously succeeded in containing. It's true: Qaddafi in his time was a horror, but what has replaced him is terror.

The Consequences for Lebanon

NS: What are the consequences for Lebanon of this intensifying war in Syria? It's said here that 30,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Lebanon?

El-Hachem: It's not the 30,000 Syrians in question that we fear. What we fear are the Salafists, Lebanese jihadis, who, supported financially, logistically, and equipped by Qatar and Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and naively believing in the imminent downfall of the regime in Syria before the Islamist jihadis on all sides that confront it, have unrelentingly these last days multiplied all of their provocations to involve Lebanon in the Syrian quagmire.

NS: But are these the Salafists? Don't they have support from Lebanese political forces? The Saad Hariri [former Lebanese Prime Minister] camp?

El-Hachem: Saad Hariri has played an insidious role in this entire affair. Also his party has long acted, even up to now, as a brood hen for adventurist fundamentalist movements. From the beginning, in effect, he had continually supported the Salafists on the sly, and encouraged them to intervene, making use of them as a bogeyman for others, whether Shi'ites or Christians, so that he could pass himself off—the party of Hariri—as the reassuring symbol of moderation to everyone.

About two years ago, Mr. Hariri sought refuge overseas—no one knows why. His political movement fell into desuetude, and the Salafists got out, like the genie from the magic lamp in the tales of Aladdin. And today, he can't get them back into the lamp, because they have financing and support from foreign powers, and have since had the ability to fly on their own, or rather, act and react on their own behalf.

NS: And outside the Lebanese political system...

El-Hachem: And outside the Lebanese political system. There are groups of this type which are already carrying weapons in the north of the country. But in Sidon in the south, there is a Salafist movement which so far flaunts itself as being peaceful, which gathers under the leadership of Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir. His ostensible pacificism doesn't make him any less dangerous, because every time he opens up to a religious provocation against the Shi'ites, he unleashes a ferment of resentment, whose danger to inter-religious relations, in particular, Sunni-Shi'ite, no one should underestimate. He is organizing a sit-in in Sidon against arming the Islamic resistance in Lebanon.

But who are his enemies? Not only us and Hezbollah, but also the Future tendency, and the Sunni parties as a whole. In Sidon, Saad Hariri's sister was seen leading the resistance to these groups. In Tripoli [Lebanon], six weeks ago, it was the Sunnis who set up a barrage against the Islamist track. Also, in Beirut: Mr. Chaker Boujawi was attacked in the region west of Beirut. This was a Sunni, attacked by Sunnis close to Saad Hariri and his party. So, it is the Sunnis who are, among others,

in the process of countering the Salafists. That's why I say that it's a minority who is running into adventure and attempting to demoralize the Army and exclude it from the north of the country.

The Role of Bandar bin Sultan

NS: How do you perceive Prince Bandar bin Sultan being named to head Saudi intelligence on July 22?

El-Hachem: The nomination of Bandar seems to be the last attempt of the Western clan to finally ensure its stranglehold over Syria. So far, the overlord powers haven't achieved a single one of their objectives. This nomination is thus a last-ditch strategy. Considering that he is so close to the Anglo-American oligarchy, giving him command over operations in that region is like installing the United States directly in command of operations. The people regard his ascent as head of Saudi intelligence with quite some apprehension.

Further, what is also a threat is that, following an eventual failure in Syria, the strategy of Prince Bandar could be behind a sort of flight-forward, whose objective would be to plunge the entire region into war. This is the perspective which weighs in as the most serious threat to Lebanon, but also to all the countries bordering Syria as a whole (in addition to Lebanon: Turkey, Iraq and Jordan). Because we think we've learned, based on all of the intelligence divulged as of yesterday, that Bandar is behind the attempts against Lebanon, aiming at destabilizing it, and eventually overthrowing the incumbent government, and replacing it with a government headed by a certain Mohammed Chatah, who is, on a small scale, agent number one for the American intelligence services in Lebanon. He would be in Lebanon what Bandar bin Sultan represents in Saudi Arabia.

The ultimate end would be an attempt to impose a Pax Israeli in the region: the end of [any prospects for] an independent Palestinian State, its utter replacement with a kind of autonomy installed over an even more cramped territory than that controlled now by the Palestinian Authority; with all that that threatens to entail, such as religious war in the region: in Iraq, in Saudi Arabia, in Turkey.

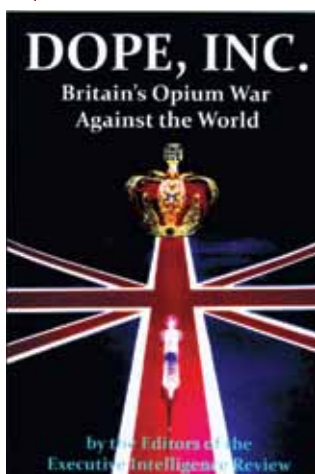
NS: Could Prince Bandar have been at the origin of the attack against the four close collaborators of Bashar al-Assad?

El-Hachem: All informed sources point their finger in the direction of Bandar bin Sultan. Because this presupposes training, staffing, financing, deep pockets, etc. And who has the capabilities for that? He does! This is the money from petrodollars, drugs, HSBC, etc.

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