

Only Outside Powers Want To Break Up Syria

Professor Elias Samo teaches International Affairs in Syria and the United States and lectures internationally on the history of the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli Fellow at the National Council on U.S. Arab Relations (NCUSAR) in Washington, D.C. and was Full Professor in the Political Science Department at Central Michigan University for 20 years. Professor Samo taught and helped establish a Graduate Department in International Relations, and established and chaired the Office of International Programs at the University of Aleppo. He also taught International Relations at the University of Kalamoon in Syria.

On Oct. 14, Prof. Samo spoke at the NCUSAR's 24th Annual Arab-U.S. Policymakers Conference in Washington. In his remarks, he said that a great victim in Syria is the truth. He criticized the hypocritical record of regime change pushed by President Barack Obama, and condemned the outside powers, both in the region and in the United States and Western Europe, that have aided and abetted the Islamic and other jihadis. Prof. Samo said that nobody inside Syria wants to break the country up,—that is an outsider's delusion,—and said that it is in the interest of every nation to support Syria's war against the jihadis to keep Syria intact, independent, and sovereign. After the Washington conference, Prof. Samo sat down with EIR's Jeffrey Steinberg for this interview.

EIR: I'd like to start with something which you raised at the conference, and raised again just now, which is that inside Syria, there is no desire whatsoever for the country to be broken up.

Samo: Definitely not. No Syrian wants to break up Syria. When I say no Syrian, there's always an exception here and there, but by and large, the Syrians are proud of Syria, are proud of the fact that, as I told you yesterday after the speech at the National Council, Syria is the cradle of civilizations, the home of the monotheistic religions, the home of the two oldest continuously inhabited cities, Damascus and Aleppo.

Syria is mentioned in all the ancient history books and in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and The



A cradle of ancient civilizations and religions: The shrine of John the Baptist inside the Umayyad mosque's prayer hall in Damascus, Syria.

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Quran. Syria is the homeland of Jesus Christ and the first time the term Christianity was used by St. Paul was in Syria. These are things that have value—moral, ethical, civilizational, cultural values that we are proud of. Syria has existed since the beginning. Why would the people of Syria, knowing what they know about their country and the pride they have in it, want to break the country up? There's no way that the Syrians would tell you: Yes, I want to divide my country. The notion of division is being talked about by outsiders.

Proud to Be Syrian

I think most Syrians during the present turmoil have, as I do, two missions:

The first mission is to maintain Syria's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. The second mission is to maintain Eastern Christianity, to maintain the Christians in Syria, because they are the indigenous people. Christians in Syria are the American Indians. Christians in Syria are very loyal, very patriotic. They are the connecting link between the Muslim East and the Christian West. The connecting link between the two cultures, two civilizations.

EIR: One of the things that is really profoundly impressive is that in the Great Mosque in Damascus, right in the middle is the tomb of John the Baptist.

Samo: Yes. Many visitors come to Syria and when they see that, to them it's like when they see a Bishop and a Mufti sitting together in a very friendly, amicable, loving relationship. They take a picture of it. I used to tell groups coming from the West, Europe and America, that Syria is a model for common living. Muslims and Christians living together amicably, in a friendly way, in a very productive way, seeing each other first as human beings, as Syrians, and then in terms of religion, which is not the major factor in the relationship among Syrians of various faiths.

It was exceptional, but a tragedy has hit us, or several tragedies, one of which is, I think, tearing down the social fabric in Syria. There has been a lot of blood between the various components, religious or ethnic Syrians, and it will take a long time for the rift to heal. Nevertheless, despite that, the Syrians still consider themselves as Syrian, as one people.

Hijacked by Islamists

EIR: You mentioned that you traced the troubles back to the fact that what originally started out as the

“Arab Spring” became hijacked by some radical Islamists?

Samo: By Islamists, Salafists, yes. It started in late 2010, and then accelerated, snowballed, in 2011 and thereafter in several Arab states. It started as an uprising by people looking for a better life,—employment, good schools, good hospitals, the right to vote, the right to change the leadership, the right to have a say in how they are ruled. This is something very normal, and people rose, asking for these things.

However, with the passage of time, the Arab Spring was kidnapped by the Islamists and Salafists, who turned it into an Islamist Spring, an Arab Fall, and a Christian Winter. The challenge facing the Arabs now is to reclaim their Spring.

When the demonstrations started in Syria in 2011, and turned from peaceful demonstrations to violent demonstrations, the perception in the West—it's an article of faith now—is that it turned into violent demonstrations because the Syrian Forces started firing at the demonstrators. I question that. I question that in the sense that I am not sure who started the violence.

Was it the Syrian Forces who started shooting at the demonstrators, or was it the many sleeper cells who infiltrated the demonstrations and started the violence? It could have been Islamist Salafist cells or Muslim Brotherhood (MB) cells, or Israeli cells or others; and each had its reasons and objectives to ignite the confrontation.

For the MB it was revenge for the beating they took at the hands of the Syrian government during their uprising in the late '70s and early '80s, with the brutal finale in 1982 in the city of Hama. For the Israelis, the demonstrations in 2011 provided the opportunity to deal a blow to Syria to render it an ineffective threat to Israel's security. For the U.S.A. it was an opportunity to destabilize Syria, something they had sought, going back many years. For the Saudis it was both personal and sectarian. The personal had to do with a speech by President Assad prior to 2011 in which he unwisely referred to the Arab leaders as half-men, and for an Arab to be accused of being half a man is the ultimate insult. The second part has to do with the Saudis' desire to have a Sunni ruling authority in Damascus oriented toward the Sunni Arabs, not Shi'ite Iran.

Threats to the Future

EIR: You talked about the greatest threats to the future of Syria. What are those threats? You had men-

tioned, I think, you said the greatest future threats are that some of the elites have left, including the Christian community, and that over the five years of the war, there are fewer schools, and that the youth without schools will be incapable of operating in a modern economy.

Samo: When I talk about threats to Syria's national security, I talk about Turkey and Israel. Syria is surrounded by Turkey in the north, and Israel in the South, and both occupy Syrian territory. Turkey occupies Alexandretta which was part of Syria, and the French gave it to them, and Israel has occupied the Golan.

Both also would like to have more Syrian territory, and both of them don't wish us well. They've proven that in what Erdogan is doing to Syria now, and the Israelis behind the scenes. So these are the states that threaten our national security.

But what I was talking about that you mentioned—the elite and Christians—is that Syria is going to pay in the future because a substantial number of the elite has left; the economic, industrial, professional elites, the money power, and the brain power have left Syria.

Many of the Christians also are elite; they also have capital power and brain power, and they also have left.

Furthermore, while the present elite deal with the state at the present time, move the state forward now, it is the children who will be the future elite that would lead the country forward, modernize it. Many of the Syrian children have been for the last four or five years without schooling. And not only have we not built new schools that we needed to build, but the schools we had, many of them are destroyed.

We'll have a new generation of Syrians, who have not had access to education.

EIR: Specifically, what is your assessment about two countries? One is Saudi Arabia, where reports are about their help for al-Qaeda in Iraq, which now calls itself Islamic State, and for al-Nusra, funneling a tre-



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The thriving commercial quarter of Damascus prior to the assault in 2011.

mendous amount of arms—not just by accident, but deliberately to the Islamists. Do you have a view of what these reports are saying?

Samo: Saudi Arabia is concerned or motivated by fear that the Shi'ite Iranians are establishing a Shi'ite Crescent, extending from Iran to Iraq to Syria, and down to Lebanon. That's their great fear. From a Saudi perspective, there's concern that there's genuinely such a Shi'ite Crescent. But the majority of Syrians are Sunnis, and they have good relations with the Iranians—that does not mean the Syrians will become part of Iran, or part of the Shi'ite Crescent.

I don't think it would ever come to pass that Syria would be part of any Shi'ite Crescent, nor would Lebanon. It's true, the majority of the Iraqis are Shi'ite, but the Sunnis plus Kurds constitute a substantial minority, and they are not going to have a Shi'ite Crescent or control by Iran. I think the Saudis are exaggerating their fear.

EIR: And the Russian situation? It's obviously changed the complexity a great deal.

Samo: I don't know much about military tactics or military strategies, but they are on board. In the final analysis, the Syrian government is recognized by the overwhelming majority of nations in the world. It's a

member of the United Nations, and has a government in Damascus. The ruling government in Damascus which represents Syria, has the sovereign right to invite other states to come and help it.

What's wrong with that?

An Epicenter of Crisis

EIR: What would be your best hopes for Syria in the course of the immediate months, and next year or two ahead? What would be, in your view, the best way for Syria to be saved?

Samo: I hope for the survival of Syria and Eastern Christianity. How they come about, how it will work out, I have no crystal ball.

However, having said that, I am reminded of the proverbial saying, when the elephants fight, the grass suffers. Syria, in particular, and the Fertile Crescent—Syria and Iraq—in general is the fighting ground for six elephants, actually worse than elephants, six brutal historic conflicts which have converged simultaneously on Syria like earthquakes. Syria today is the epicenter, ground zero, of these six crises, and they are:

1) A three-dimensional domestic, regional, and international proxy-war.

a) Domestically, a brutal war pitting the Syrian government against a variety of forces ranging from local warlords, mafias, criminals, to what have become international terrorist organizations such as Daesh and al-Qaida-Nusra in Syria.

b) Regionally, a conflict which includes Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, and others.

c) Internationally, the U.S.A. and some European states vs. Russia. Are we back to the cold war proxy wars of the past Middle Eastern wars? Probably not, hopefully not.

2) Jihad vs. Ijtihad.

It is a historic Islam vs. Islam conflict between the sword and the pen. Jihad was interpreted by some to mean spreading the Islamic faith by force, if neces-



UNICEF

Syrian refugee children at an informal tented school in Lebanon's Bekaa valley in 2013. An entire generation is growing up without access to education.

sary, while Ijtihad means to reinterpret and modernize the faith to bring it up to date, taking into consideration time and place. In the present turmoil through the Muslim Arab region, Jihad has raised its ugly head holding the sword in the upper hand, while Ijtihad has lowered its head holding the pen in the lower hand. Jihad is fearless while Ijtihad is fearful, Jihad is moving forward while Ijtihad is dormant. The outcome of this conflict, which goes back to the Tenth Century when it is said that the door for Ijtihad was closed, will have great repercussions on the region and the world.

3) Sunni vs. Shi'a conflict.

This is an old religious divide which traces its origin to the Seventh Century with the rise of Islam.

The conflict originally centered around the legitimate successor Caliph, following the death of Muhammad.

With the passage of time it went beyond the question of succession and developed into theological differences. It went through violent and dormant stages at various historical periods.

Unfortunately, this Sunni-Shi'a conflict has raised its head with vengeance in the Middle East most acutely since the start of the misnamed Arab Spring. The conflict is now being played out in Syria and Iraq, led by



State Department

Potential collaboration? U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov shake hands in Geneva on April 17, 2014, after an agreement on Ukraine.

the Sunni, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey on one side and Shi'a Iran on the other.

4) Arabism vs. Salafi Islam.

The Muslim Arab has two primary identities. He is an Arab belonging to the Arab nation and a Muslim belonging to the Muslim nation. When you ask him to prioritize, he will say he is an Arab or a Muslim first.

For the one who prioritizes his Arabism, his Arab nation extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian-Arabian Gulf. He hopes one day the Arab world, which is now divided into 22 states, will unite.

For the Islamist, he sees the whole world a stage for the spread of Islam to engulf the whole world.

5) The historic conflict among Persian, Ottoman, and Arab Empires with the new addition of a fourth potential Judaic Empire. This tripartite ethnic and sectarian conflict has awakened. The protagonists are Iran, Turkey, and the Arabs with a leading role by Saudi Arabia and the stage is Syria and Iraq.

6) The Syrian-Israeli conflict.

Some would say that the biggest instigator and winner in Syria is Israel. A brief explanation of what motivates the present Israeli leadership is the notion of the "Iron Wall" advanced by Jabotinsky in an article written in 1923 titled "The Iron Wall." Its basic premise

is that future Israel surrounded by a hostile Muslim Arabs should be protected by an Iron Wall. The first stage of the wall after Israel was created was conventional military power. The second stage of the wall was the development of nuclear power.

The third stage is a strategic wall which is in the making, in which Israel would be surrounded by neutralized or failed Arab States which constitute a threat to Israel: Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

The Egyptian-Israel Peace Treaty neutralized Israel's western frontier. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 rendered Iraq a fractured, if not a failed, state, which neutralized Israel's Eastern border. Now it is Syria which Israel wants to become a fractured or a failed state, to neutralize its northeast border.

Thus the strategic iron wall would be complete.

Final Reflections

1) Syria, or parts of it, is a swamp full of beasts tearing each other apart in a jungle with no law or order. No nation deserves that.

2) There are four issues regarding Syria: terrorism, Syrian refugees, preserving Syria and the fate of President Assad. In prioritizing these issues, one would think the order would be fighting terrorism, dealing with the flow of Syrian refugees, maintaining Syrian unity, and lastly the fate of President Assad.

There is almost an international consensus on the first three. One would hope that the great influentials would put their act together and deal with these three issues. The fate of President Assad would be determined by the Syrians, not by outsiders. The fall of President Assad now means the fall of Syria.

3) Concerning Eastern Christianity, two bishops were kidnapped in Syria two-and-a-half years ago, Bishop Yohanna Ibrahim of the Syriac Orthodox Church and Bishop Bolos Yazji of the Greek Orthodox Church.

We don't know anything about their fate. Their kidnapping shocked the Syrian Christian community. It was a factor leading to greater Christian emigration from Syria.