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Arm Syria's Rebels

By ROGER COHEN

LONDON — Here are some home truths about Syria. It's going to get worse before it gets better. Nobody can put this genie back in a bottle. This is the mother of all proxy fights. The remorseless Assad regime is finished, when it dies being the only question.

Nations get to freedom from tyranny by different routes. When Communism fell, some glided from the Soviet empire into the West as others agonized. Yugoslavia — a beautiful idea that never worked — is one of several nations being invoked as possible exemplars of Syria's bloody fate; others include Lebanon and Iraq.

The ingredients are familiar: Syria is a multiethnic state ruled with an iron fist by one minority — the quasi-Shiite Alawites — and including Christian, Druze and other minorities that between them compose about a quarter of the population. The majority is Sunni. When the iron fist comes off in countries like this, liberty is more readily seen as getting free of each other than uniting in the give-and-take of a new liberal order.

So it has proved for a year now in the Syria of Bashar al-Assad who, taking a leaf from his father's book, has attempted to suppress through mass slaughter the quest of a broad uprising to be free of the family stranglehold. Assad is a doctor by training! No doctor ever trampled so brazenly on the Hippocratic Oath.

The Assads are a mafia, a minority (the family) within a minority (the Alawites) within a minority (the Mukhabarat secret police). They co-opted others — notably the Sunni merchant class — through imposed stability, but in essence, like every tyrant dislodged in the Arab Spring, they have ruled a nation as if it was their personal fiefdom, a plaything to be passed from father to son for the benefit of cousins and cronies.

Well, that's over. Aleppo is the not the new Marrakesh after all. Those lovely tourism posters on London buses have been packed away. Arabs have had it with their Godfathers.

I said it's going to get worse before it gets better. The Syrian compact is broken; a new compact under the Assads is inconceivable. Wider interests are in play. Iranian Shiite theocracy, increasingly isolated, is defending the regime against a Free Syrian Army funded in part by Saudi Sunni theocracy: that's the proxy war.

Vladimir Putin, fearful of Russian Springs in his own neighborhood, has with signature cynicism opted to defend an old ally against U.S. demands that Assad go, an objective not pursued with any coherence until now by the Obama administration. Israel knows Assad, who helps arm Hezbollah but is a predictable and largely passive enemy. It does not know what may lie beyond a security state whose habits it can predict.

In short, Syria is dangerous. But that not a reason for passivity or incoherence. As the Bosnian war showed, the basis for any settlement must be a rough equality of forces. So I say step up the efforts, already quietly ongoing, to get weapons to the Free Syrian Army. Train those forces, just as the rebels were trained in Libya. Payback time has come around: The United States warned Assad about allowing Al Qaeda fighters to transit Syria to Iraq. Now matériel and special forces with the ability to train a ragtag army can transit Iraq — and other neighboring states — into Syria. This should be a joint effort of Western and Arab states.

At the same time, mount a big U.N.-coordinated humanitarian effort centered on enclaves for refugees in Turkey, Jordan and elsewhere, establishing, where possible, safe corridors to these havens.

Push hard to bring Russia and China around: They will not defend Assad beyond the point where that defense looks like a liability for other bigger interests in the United States, the Gulf and Europe.

I hear the outcry already: Arming Assad's opponents will only exacerbate the fears of Syria's minorities and unite them, ensure greater bloodshed, and undermine diplomatic efforts now being led by Kofi Annan, a gifted and astute peacemaker. It risks turning a proxy war into a proxy conflagration.

There is no policy for Syria at this stage that does not involve significant risk. But the only cease-fire I can see that will not amount to an ephemeral piece of paper is one based on a rough balance of forces. For that, the Free Syrian Army must be armed.

In the end, this course will support, not undermine, Annan's diplomacy and perhaps open the way for the sort of transition outlined by the Arab League. In return, the divided Syrian opposition must provide a firm commitment to respect the rights of minorities. The treatment of minorities — like that of women — is one of the many pivotal tests of the Arab Spring.

If Assad falls, Iran is critically weakened. Tehran's established conduit to Hezbollah disappears. Choosing between engineering the downfall of Assad and bombing Iran's nuclear facilities is really a no-brainer: The former is smart and doable, the latter is folly. Assad's wife has been buying property in London: Make her use it and make the Syrian people free.

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