

The Syrian Crisis: Can Dialogue Still Prevail Over Violence?

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Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances. Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring

By Carsten Wieland

Cune Press, Seattle, 2012, 336 pp.

This is a fascinating and highly readable book, providing one of the most detailed accounts of the dramatic events in Syria over the past decade and before. Carsten Wieland gives an original and critical in-depth analysis of modern Syrian history with a refreshing approach.

Since the start of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011 various other relevant books have been published on Syria, but none of these has thus far dealt with Syria's past decade so much in detail and in-depth as the book under review. If you really want to be well informed about why things did not go well, or went wrong, time and again, during the epoch of Bashar al-Asad, Wieland's book is a must. It is a rather comprehensive work, tackling a high diversity of most relevant Syrian subjects. It portrays Syria from both its negative and positive sides, leading sometimes to conclusions that may surprise its readers, particularly where Syria is placed in a more positive light, when compared to other countries in the region, for instance in the field of secularism, the position of women, its hospitality to receive huge numbers of Iraqi refugees in the past, and so on. Wieland's main line is, however, strongly critical, and could hardly be otherwise, because of the severe dictatorship of the Syrian Ba'ath regime and its bloody repression. Wieland has noted in this respect that well before the unprecedented street protests started in March 2011, "the regime in Damascus had launched a new wave of suppression at home against human rights activists and mostly secular opposition forces," but that "many Western governments did not see – or did not want to see" this.

This is not only an academic reference work, helping us to better understand Syrian history; it could also be used as a tool for future policy-making, and to help evaluating what foreign governments might have, or should have done differently during this past "decade of lost chances."

One of the key questions is whether there would have been any use in directly communicating with the Bashar al-Asad regime, at the highest level, with the aim of helping achieve a peaceful solution in Syria, ever since the start of the Syrian Revolution in March 2011.

When looking for an answer in the study of Wieland, I am inclined to conclude that the Syrian regime has indeed missed one opportunity after another to seriously implement political

change and reform, or to improve its international relations, or to put it differently: it almost never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Taking that conclusion as a point of departure, it would have seemed useless to directly communicate or negotiate with the Damascus regime on how to find a solution to this bloody crisis that has already lasted for over a year and a half. David Lesch concludes in his most recent book "Syria: The Fall of the



"Untitled" by Yasir Safi

House of Assad" (2012) that Bashar al-Asad refuses to negotiate from a position of weakness. We have seen, however, that President Bashar al-Asad is not either prepared to negotiate from a position of strength. This implies in fact that there is a vicious circle which in all cases means that the Syrian president is not going to give up, and that he will fight "until the end," which from the perspective of most foreign parties or observers means the end of the regime of President Bashar al-Asad. Whether or not this is wishful thinking in the shorter term remains to be seen. One thing is clear, however: it would be unrealistic to expect the Syrian president and his regime to resign out of free will and to sign their own death warrants.

Whereas it is true that the Syrian Ba'athist regime has lost many opportunities or chances, Western countries have occasionally done the same. They could, for instance, have made an effort in the past to achieve a better understanding with Damascus, which later on could have been used as a basis to help solving the present crisis. Wieland notes that after the Anglo-American attacks on Iraq in 2003 "it was the West that missed a

great opportunity to focus on common secular values and the tolerance of religious minorities, on the fight against militant Islamism. This would have strengthened the pro-Western actors within the Syrian bureaucracy and political elite.” President Bashar al-Asad was well received in France in 2008, and if Paris would, as a result, have had any extra possibilities of personally influencing the Syrian president, these clearly went lost when France chose the side of the opposition in 2011.

It has been a missed chance of Western countries not to engage in any kind of serious dialogue with the Syrian regime after the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. With such an extremely serious and bloody crisis at hand, it would at least have been worth, both morally and politically, to make a genuine effort. At the beginning of the Syrian Revolution a dialogue with the Damascus regime might have been less difficult than later on, once the bloody confrontations got further out of hand and reached the dimensions of a civil war. The European Union did not seriously engage the Damascus regime, however; neither did the United States nor most other countries. Western governments instead cut themselves off from the possibility of playing any serious role in helping bring a solution based on political dialogue.

It is rather safe to assume that the Western governments that rejected any kind of dialogue with the Syrian regime did not do so because Syria experts had told them that such a dialogue would have been useless. After all, who could have predicted early on that a dialogue with Damascus would not lead anywhere? Western policies rather emanated from the fact that it was much easier to issue strong declarations and warnings against the Syrian regime through the media and international institutions like the United Nations Security Council, and to impose sanctions, than to be seen communicating with the so-called “murderous al-Asad regime.” That would have been politically less attractive, certainly from the perspective of Western internal politics. The easier way was chosen, in various cases under the false presumption that the regime would fall rather sooner than later. What counts most, however, is not whether or not these Western policies were morally justified (which in fact most of them were), but rather whether they had the desired effect. This they did not. The violence did not stop, but only increased. The regime was not brought down to its knees by the sanctions; neither did the sanctions induce the regime to introduce serious political reforms, let alone that the president stepped down. The sanctions did not only cause a lot of problems to the regime, but also led to immense suffering, hardship and misery among the Syrian population. As has happened more often than not in the past with sanctions imposed elsewhere in the world, the sanctions were unable to force the regime into taking the steps for which they were intended.

Russia and China clearly have a rather different vision on how to help solving the conflict in Syria. They support a political solution, including the possibility of a compromise between the Ba’thist regime and the opposition. Most other countries are also in favor of a political solution, but only if this includes a regime change. In practice this means that these countries want

to keep supporting the opposition until the Ba’th regime collapses. Seen from that perspective, the support of most Western countries for the peace efforts of Kofi Annan has at most been half-hearted; and the same applies to the efforts of his successor Lakhdar Brahimi.

The Russians do not want the Libya scenario to be repeated, in the sense that they refuse to authorize, directly or indirectly, any military intervention in Syria through the UN Security Council. Also important is that Russia does not want an Islamic fundamentalist regime at its southern flank in Syria, which might be the outcome of military intervention or of a civil war there.

It has often been suggested that if Russia and China would not have vetoed but would have endorsed the respective UN Security Council resolutions against the Syrian regime, the situation would have been quite different on the ground. It is doubtful, however, that the Syrian regime would act much differently as long as it really thinks its position is in danger. Having a UN Security Council resolution does not automatically imply any positive change.

Russia and China may one day be blamed by a Syrian successor regime for having unnecessarily prolonged the crisis by their refusal to support any solution that explicitly or implicitly took as a point of departure that the al-Asad regime had to be removed.

Western and other countries that have been supporting the Syrian opposition, may later on, however, be blamed just as well, notably for not having given enough support for helping to speeding up the fall of the regime. As a result, the severe suffering of the Syrian people has, according to the view of the opposition, been unnecessarily prolonged. Most of the Western countries that want the al-Asad regime to be removed have taken all kinds of measures, but they do not (yet) clearly support any military intervention to bring the regime to an end. The background is that they are only too much aware of the negative and costly consequences of such an operation, particularly after having seen what happened in, for instance, Iraq. Deposing the regime of Bashar al-Asad without military intervention may, however, be a very long and bloody affair, if possible at all in the shorter term.

As long as there is not any kind of political dialogue leading to a political solution, developments appear to be moving slowly in the direction of foreign military intervention of one kind or another, directly or indirectly. In that respect the regime’s “security solution” is being reciprocated by another “security solution” instigated by the Syrian opposition with help from the outside world.

Wieland ends his book by concluding that “the Syrian people cannot afford and do not deserve another decade of lost chances. If the most grim scenarios unfold, however, the next decade may be much worse for many Syrians than it was, prior to the Arab Spring, under the rule of Asad.” It appears as if these most grim scenarios have already started to unfold. The big question is whether there might still be a possibility to get out of this situation through dialogue instead of bloodshed. The answer is in the hands of the Syrians. **AJ**