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Editor:

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HOW CAN WE STOP THE SUPPRESSION IN SYRIA?

Teruaki Moriyama

A Jordanian specialist has said that the truth of the current situation in Syria may lie somewhere between the news distributed by the international Arabic media and that related by the Syrian government media. As this comment clearly suggests, it is difficult to know what is going on inside Syria and to assess the power and influence of the Assad regime and the anti-regime movement on the Syrian people. Since March 2011, when large-scale anti-regime popular demonstrations began, the government media have not acknowledged the existence of those demonstrations.

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They have consistently claimed that the Syrian people are satisfied with the regime's reform efforts, and have attributed the confrontation to an invasion by foreign armed terrorists. The international media, on the other hand, have stood with the anti-regime movement and emphasized its determination to overcoming oppression by the regime. The discourse from neither side can be trusted absolutely. It is improbable that foreign terrorists could create such tremendous confusion that thousands of people would flee to neighboring countries if the people truly supported the regime. At the same time, if the anti-regime movement were capable of mobilizing the huge numbers of people that the international media is reporting, the Assad regime might already have been forced to make major concessions.

These problems concerning the reliability of the news do not negate the fact that a serious struggle continues in Syria. As to the reasons why the popular demonstrations have not convinced the authoritarian president to step down, specialists note the following two points: (1) the army and security forces, at least their elite units, remain loyal to the Assad regime, and (2) there is a lack of cooperation among the different groups in the anti-regime movement. Considerable parts of the movement are led by Syrians living in foreign countries who have not succeeded in building effective links with demonstrators inside Syria. While the anti-regime movement has achieved a great triumph in the arena of international opinion, it has failed to construct a unified stronghold for resistance to the *Gewalt Apparat* of the regime on the ground in Syria. Under such circumstances, the people of Syria have been bleeding in vain from violence for more than a year.


In the confusion, actors other than the demonstrators have moved into action. Those actors include rebelling army units, Kurdish nationalist groups and radical Sunni jihadist groups. The jihadist groups appeal to Syrian Sunnis to fight against the "heterodox Alawite regime." However, the Assad regime is not an "Alawite regime" based on Alawi sectarianism, though the Assad family and the majority of their inner circle are, in fact, Alawis. Not all Alawis see the Assad family as their leaders, and not a few Sunnis support the Assad regime. The simplified sectarian discourse of "Alawi vs. Sunni" on which the jihadists and

some experts insist is not beneficial for understanding and improving the situation in Syria.

This does not mean that sectarian division may not make the situation worse. When people's everyday lives are in serious crisis, sectarian emotions that divide human beings into "we the believers" and "they the unbelievers" often justifies the believers in giving vent to their frustration in the form of attacks against other sects. Therefore, if the ongoing confusion destroys the everyday lives of the Syrian people completely, it is probable that Sunnis, the sectarian majority in Syria, will empathize with the jihadist appeal. Should this worst-case scenario come true, the confusion would not be confined to the single country of Syria. It is expected that the harmful effects would spread into neighboring countries through the circulation of a large quantity of weapons, the outflow of refugees, or the dissemination of narrow-minded sectarian thought.

The disorder in Syria should be settled as soon as possible, but this cannot be achieved simply by defeating the Assad regime. The structure of the conflict is too complex to be reduced to a simple dichotomy of "a democratizing movement vs. an authoritarian regime." Of course, the violence by the Assad regime must be blamed. However, it is not useful in rebuilding stability to break off negotiations with the Assad regime by labeling it the villain. A coarse military intervention that, satisfied by defeating the "evil" regime, withdraws and leaves behind a confused situation will completely destroy the lives of the people and create a worse crisis, unleashing Sunni-Jihadist hostility toward religious minorities. Easy acceptance and reproduction of the essentialist good-evil dichotomy not only represents a neglect of effort to understand the realities of the situation but is also injurious to the people living in Syria. We must carry out demonstrative and multifaceted research on the complex realities. In this sense, the endeavors of the UN-Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan and the activities of UN monitors should be given due credit. Even if those attempts do not bring about stability immediately, they will give us new knowledge of and perspectives on conditions inside Syria. Based on this verified knowledge, the international community should continue trying to negotiate with, and mediate between, all actors, including the Assad regime. I believe that steady and patient efforts will

prepare the conditions under which the Syrian people can peacefully select their own government.

As part of international efforts, Japan supports the refugees and the Syrian people. In addition to that, I think that it is possible for Japan to contribute to unification of the anti-regime movements by cooperating with Turkey, which has close relations with them. In approaching the Assad regime, Japan might urge Iran, Russia and China, which have relatively good relations with the regime, to force it to agree to a ceasefire. Through different channels, Japan should help stabilize Syria and the Middle East, a region critical for Japan, but in any case, primary consideration should be given to the security of ordinary people and their day-to-day safety. This is, I believe, the soundest way to establish stability and democracy, as naïve as this may sound. 

Dr. Teruaki Moriyama is Research Fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIJA).