

---

Saturday, 15 June 2013

## Syria: The Libya II scenario

Barack Obama surprised us by changing his stance and by adopting a more aggressive policy on Syria, one that is close to a declaration of war. Syria's opposition says the shift in Obama's position is late, but it's better late than never. After the White House acknowledged that the Assad regime crossed the "red line" by using chemical arms and will be punished for doing so, we have moved far from the idea of a Geneva 2 and closer to a Libyan scenario, or "Libya 2."

The focus will now shift towards the overthrow of the regime through a mixture of foreign interference and supporting the Syrian rebels on the battlefield.

To understand the new turn of events, we have to study them in the context of the Syrian crisis. A year ago, President Bashar al-Assad almost lost the war militarily, due to the Free Syrian Army strikes and due to their seizure of more than half of the country's border crossings. Everyone thought the regime would fall within months. He convinced the Russians and the Iranians to increase the quantity and quality of their military support. And so it happened that his forces which were in a poor state were strengthened. The balance shifted and thus the weakness of the FSA, which was losing force in Homs and even in Damascus until December of last year, came to surface. At this point, the FSA received massive support mainly from Saudi Arabia, a country at the forefront of managing the crisis. The Jordanian front was opened to provide important humanitarian and logistic aid and huge amounts of arms were received by opposition fighters. The FSA began to score victories quickly. Assad's allies then realized that the regime's forces were fiercely shelling cities but they were not winning battles and were thus gradually losing ground. Assad's allies decided to engage in the war with their own forces. It was a bold decision by the Iranians, who felt that the Americans did not have the appetite to fight. During the past two months there have been testimonies stating that Iranian forces, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias are fighting in Syria.

## The battle for Qusayr

Qusayr was a decisive battle. It wasn't strategic, as it was labeled by many, but rather a propaganda battle for both parties. It became clear beyond doubt that thousands of Hezbollah members fought to take over Qusayr and its neighboring towns. The war today is no longer among the Syrians themselves. It's no longer between the Assad army and the FSA. Iran and its allies have become directly involved in the war, fighting the FSA, which is lacking in capabilities and manpower. Assad's victory has become possible for the first time since the revolution erupted 27 months ago. Qusayr was an important incident that opened everyone's eyes. The Gulf's statements, in addition to Britain's and France's, sounded the alarm in Washington and relayed the idea that Iran's occupation of such a big country as Syria would alter the entire region's power structure. Holding the first Geneva conference more than a year ago, which was originally an Iranian idea adopted by Russia, aimed to announce a new reality in the already disturbed Middle East, stating that Iran has become the major player. The question that must be asked is how can a besieged Iran expand geographically and become the center of activity in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon? Despite the important indications of change in Washington, we do not want to say that the battle will be concluded anytime soon because it is complicated and susceptible to surprises. It may be finalized in August of this year or it may need two more years. What is certain however is that changes in international stances are an important military and political development that will show results within the upcoming days. It will probably achieve establishing an internationally protected zone; an area protected by NATO in cooperation with Gulf countries. The FSA will be publicly aided by more advanced weapons and by important data on the level of military finalization on ground. If there's no political progress by the Syrian regime, such as announcing early elections at the end of this year instead of holding them in the summer of next year, and if Iran and its allies don't prove that they withdrew their forces from Syria (which is unlikely), we will head towards a scenario similar to Libya's where NATO forces toppled Qaddafi's regime after the rebels failed to finalize the war.

This article was first published in Asharq al-Awsat on June 15, 2013,

---

Abdulrahman al-Rashed is the General Manager of Al Arabiya News Channel. A veteran and internationally acclaimed journalist, he is a former editor-in-chief of the London-based leading Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat, where he still regularly writes a political column. He has also served as the editor of Asharq al-Awsat's sister publication, al-Majalla. Throughout his career, Rashed has interviewed several world leaders, with his articles garnering worldwide recognition, and he has successfully led Al Arabiya to the highly regarded, thriving and influential position it is in today.