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Trump's Egoism in Syria: A Dangerous Recipe for Promoting Radicalization

By Hisham H. Ahmed, Ph.D.

The Trump Administration cruise attack on shayrat airbase near Homs in Syria on April 6, 2017 is clearly motivated by sweeping personal, as well as internal and external determinants. Using the chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun a few days earlier as a pretext is but illustrative of deception and falsification of facts. World's memory is still live regarding the deliberate misinformation made by then Secretary of State, Collin Powel at the United Nations in 2003 who falsely alleged that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. This charge was used as justification for launching the war on Iraq, obliterating that country and changing its regime. Even more recently in 2013, President Barak Obama found himself with shaky policy due to the false information fed to him regarding another allegation of Syrian Government use of chemical weapons against civilians, a development which was propagated as a violation of Obama's red line. Then and now, reports are quite plentiful which demonstrate possession and use of chemical weapons by terrorist organizations, like ISIS, Alnussra Front and Al-Qaeda in both Iraq and Syria.

To restate the obvious, the United States has not been a neutral party to the Syrian crisis. It has funded, trained and fought on behalf of the militant opposition, including terrorist organizations, like Alnussra Front, Alqaeda, as well as ISIS. Two months ago, ISIS swiftly moved into taking over Syrian-hit targets in Deir Alzur by the United States, exactly as ISIS moved some of its forces toward Palmyra in conjunction with the latest US attack on Shayrat airbase. Trump himself repeatedly charged that the Obama Administration was behind the creation and training of terrorist organizations.

Yet, why would Donald Trump embark on dragging the United States into this military adventure now whose consequences can never be less than detrimental to the United States as well as to world peace and security?

Trump is still hung up on the election campaign atmosphere where he seems fixated on proving that he is more decisive when it comes to questions of national security than President Barak Obama. The statement made by his Press Secretary, Shawn Spicer only a few days ago in which he cast blame at the Obama Administration for what is happening in Syria is quite illustrative. It has become quite evident that almost every statement and/or action by Trump is reflective of a deep self-centered egoistic personality. It seems that it is all about him, and not necessarily about the "vital national security interests of the United States" as he would put it. Trump's mindset has not changed since he was elected as president about two and a half months ago. His main driving force is to single himself out as a President who is ready to act and be tough, even if this means contradicting his earlier promises and statement regarding non-intervention in other countries as some of his predecessors have done. In other words, this latest US aggression on Syria, without UN and/or congressional authorization, leads one to conclude that this move is quite impulsive and for sure not strategic in nature. Moreover, this attack is a flagrant violation of both international law and of US law, as it has been neither authorized by the United Nations nor by Congress. One of the messages behind this aggression is for Trump himself, i.e. to satisfy his own egoistic drive for self-fulfillment and self-aggrandizement. Never mind Trump's almost total disregard of the importance of

human rights and foreign aid towards development. Never mind his earlier criticism of policies which were aimed at regime change, particularly in Iraq and Libya! Clearly, for Trump, the end justifies the means, as far as his standing is concerned.

Trump's emotional and humanitarian overtones regarding the latest chemical attack are quite misleading. The guilty party aside for now, had Trump's humanitarianism been invoked, he would not have issued two travel bans to prevent Syrian refugees and others from entering the United States at a most dire moment in their lives. Had he been moved by human suffering, he would have at least criticized, if not condemned, Saudi Arabia for its proven responsibility in bombing and killing hundreds of Yemenis, particularly while mourning some of their dead last October. It was only two weeks ago, on March 24, 2017, that the US coalition was reported to have killed 200 Iraqi civilians during the air bombardment of Mosul: for sure, we did not see Trump shed a tear and/or invoke any emotions. Systematically, the Israeli occupation violates the human rights of Palestinians, without being bombed by the Trump Administration.

It is reasonable then to assume that Trump's personal motivations are also intertwined with his Administration's dysfunctionality and inability to govern smoothly and formulate sound policies, both domestically and internationally. As is well known, the Trump Administration has been under mounting pressure since it took office due to its irreconcilable conduct, not only with Democrats, but even more importantly with some key Republican leaders in Congress, like Sen. John McCain. Trump's resounding failure to acquire enough Republican support for his attempt to topple the Affordable Care Act (Obama Care), in addition to the repeated legal challenges to his Muslim travel bans have created an environment of political paralysis in Washington. The last impression Trump wants to allow to be widely propagated among Americans is that he is an ineffective President and that his Administration is in crisis mode. In this, there is hardly something new: when leaders stumble domestically, they are inclined to try to score points internationally. In effect, then, by launching a missile strike on Syria today, even before any credible investigation is carried out regarding the chemical attack, Trump tries to compensate for his domestic blunders with what he hopes to be perceived as international strength. Therefore, his missile strike on Syria is meant first and foremost to be for domestic consumption, i.e. to paint of himself a portrait of an effective president who rises above partisan politics.

Another important factor behind the decision to launch an attack on another sovereign state is grounded in the endemic competition/rivalry between the State Department, as represented now by Rex Tillerson, on the one hand, and the deep establishment in the Pentagon, on the other. It was only a few days ago that Tillerson announced while on his visit to Turkey that the fate of Bashshar Al-Assad will be determined by the Syrian people. Obviously, the old entrenched establishment was dismayed and displeased, in a manner that is reminiscent of the contestation of wills between the State Department and the Pentagon on Syria in the last couple of months under the Obama Administration. The message embedded in the attack is that it is the US military which has the power to determine whether Assad stays or goes, not the Syrian people.

In this context, some "intermestic" international-domestic determinants will have to be considered. It is heavily substantiated that Israel and its lobbying groups here in the US were some of the leading forces backing up the Bush Administration in its war effort on Iraq in 2003. Today's world is not much different. Israel has been quite involved in the Syrian crisis from the start, mainly by providing multi-faceted support to a number of militant terrorist organizations, like Alnusra Front. Two weeks ago, not for the first time, Israeli warplanes carried out strikes against Syrian Government targets, except that this time, Syria decided to use anti-aircraft missiles which are said to have downed two Israeli planes. It is

widely reported in the Israeli press that the Syrian anti-aircraft missiles were launched from Shayrat airbase, the very same airbase which was attacked by US tomahawk missiles. Expectedly, the downing of Israeli planes caused a big fury in the Israeli military and since it happened, the level of rhetoric and threats has been quite high. Also as anticipated, media reports show that there is no more jubilant party after the US strike on the Syrian airbase than Israel. Israel is treating the matter as an accomplishment of its own.

Obviously, for Israel, as well as for the Trump Administration, this attack also represents a strong message to Iran and to Hizbollah in Lebanon: the common theme is one and is unmistakable, that Trump is a “man” of his word.; he is decisive and does not shy away from using military force. The message is loud and clear: yesterday it was Syria and tomorrow it can be Iran.

Of course, most disturbing to Trump and his team at this stage is the looming nightmare of their perceived coalescence with Russia during the presidential election to weaken Clinton’s prospects and to enable Trump to win. Congressional and potential independent investigations on their way in this regard, undoubtedly creating a most stressful state of mind for Trump. Given this, the compulsion is irresistible for Trump to try to reverse his image as a Russian “puppet” in any way possible, even if it means putting the US and its interests in jeopardy. His attack on Syria is a clear message to the American people that he is not a wimp viz-a-viz Russia as widely suggested. It is also a statement by the entrenched military establishment to Russia that the United States under Trump does not intend to let the Russians act freely in Syria. So even at the expense of “playing with fire”, the Trump Administration takes military action in Syria, an uncontested Russian ally. In effect, this makes the US attack a real game changer as far as US-Russian relations are concerned.

Also of tremendous importance internationally is that Trump decided to commit aggression against Syria while hosting the Chinese President Xi Jinping in his Maralago resort. Clearly, in this, there is a message to China itself, not a favorite of Trump, certainly, that Trump is capable of acting militarily against China’s ally, North Korea. In other words, it seems to be the case that

Trump is framing his diplomacy through military actions.

Who is the beneficiary and the loser? All parties seem to benefit and lose at the same time, both instantaneously and strategically. For sure, terrorist organizations are celebrating a military action on their behalf. After all, they have been calling upon the United States to take out Syrian air defense systems for a long time. Now, for them, Trump is their hero. So their gratification now cannot be masked. As such, one should expect that more heinous chemical attacks will take place against some Syrian civilians so as to further implicate the Syrian Government, especially that this time the United States was provoked enough to act.

Israel, too, is quite joyous to have been able to find a loyal ally in the Trump Administration as it had in the Bush Administration. This attack on Syria is what they themselves have been wishing for. There is nothing more pleasing to the Israelis than a weaker Syrian army, especially in terms of their air defense capabilities. The Israelis did not forget and/or forgive shooting down of their two warplanes lately by Syrian missiles. Netanyahu is quite cheerful, as he leads the praise of the Trump attack on Syria. After all, this attack comes at a most critical moment for Netanyahu: his political future is almost in jeopardy, as he is being confronted with multiple legal investigations and interrogations regarding charges of corruption. He believes that this attack helps him revive his own popularity among Israelis, as he treats this development as an accomplishment for which he is responsible. This attack

motivates Netanyahu to brag that this is only the beginning of the long hoped for attack on Iran. Again, Israel is gratified instantaneously.

For sure, the inept client regimes in the Gulf, most notably Saudi Arabia joins the band of celebrators: they are members of the same coalition against Iran with Israel. The same can be said for Turkey which has been instrumental in facilitating the entry of recruits to join different terrorist organizations and in the training and backing of their fighters. This attack on Syrian air defenses bolsters their image among terrorist organizations they back and buys them some precious time, especially after the painful blows to their proxy groups in Syria at the hands of the Syrian army and its allies.

Unquestionably, Trump's ego is bloated much bigger than the world itself today. Although he is always predictably unpredictable, Trump can be said to have had his self-image revived in the way of the so many challenges he is facing.

However, instantaneous gratification aside, none of the parties referenced above can be said to enjoy any strategic benefit. If anything, the odds are enormous that the Trump Administration is rapidly pushing the United States towards uncalculated military ventures which could be translated either into a drawn-out US involvement in another bloody war in the Middle East or the fall in an uncontrollable international confrontation with other big powers, most notably Russia and China who repeatedly stood against the US in the Security Council on Syria. Russia's decision to terminate one of the hot lines for communication with the US military in Syria is indicative of potential escalation of tensions, and possibly of an all-out military show-down between the contending parties.

Increasingly, the United States under Trump will be viewed as the unpopular policeman of the world, which could push the country toward more isolation. Even more worrisome is the possibility of adding more enemies to the list of groups and organizations which target the United States, its citizens and its interests. One inevitable consequence of belittling peoples' minds is the bloating of radicalization, especially in a region where abnormality of life has become the norm rather than the exception.

For Syria, its vulnerability in the wake of this latest attack may deepen its drive to bolster its air defense systems, on the one hand, and to launch more strategic attacks at US supported groups in the opposition, on the other. As such, one may expect an intensified air campaign against the concentrated militant organizations in Idlib in the very near future.

For its part, Iran will pursue more involvement in Syria, as its leadership understands that the overarching message behind the latest attack goes beyond the Syrian border to resound in Tehran as well as in Lebanon, with Hizbollah. Furthermore, developments of this kind are expected to push the leaders of Iran away from pragmatism which has characterized Hassan Rohani's presidency thus far, and toward a more emboldened position against the United States. Only a few weeks separate us from Iran presidential election: most likely, a more hardened leadership will emerge.

Having had the upper hand in Syria thus far, Russia's Putin will undoubtedly do every thing at his disposal to maintain his comparative advantage and to maximize his benefits. Russia has already decided to, and actually did, move some more warships to the Syrian shores.

The clouds of tension are more gloomy than they have been since the start of the Syrian crisis six years ago. The prospects for a destructive cataclysmic war in the Middle East should not be underestimated. Thanks to the deferment to egoism at a moment when perspicacious vision and sound

wise judgment are most badly needed. Trump's predictable unpredictability is bound to heighten international uncertainty and instability.

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