



# SMALL WARS LEAD TO BIG WARS

The author, from a detailed explanation, relates the popular movements of the “Arab Spring” and provides us with an update about the problems that affect this part of the world in which Syria is the center of attention. The international community is carefully paying attention to the evolution of this conflict in which, as in any dynamic, complex and unfinished situation, there are more questions than answers.

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By Omar Locatelli

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## **A**RDENT REVOLUTIONARY SCALE

A Tunisian merchant’s scale gave rise to popular expressions that made rulers confront with the ruled ones leading to changes that are difficult to predict and to recognition of the citizen’s power.

At the beginning of the year 2011, in the Middle East and Northern Africa, from Tunisia to Egypt, including Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, there were popular movements

that were called the “Arab Awakening”, which still exist in Syria and are now known as “Arab Spring”. Beyond the different ways in which the Spring ended in each country, only in Syria we can still see that the conflict may extend and change from a civil war to a regional conflict.

On March 15, 2013, it was two years since Syrian students painted graffiti in the southern city of Daraa, an event that led to one of the bloodiest conflicts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This

conflict has reached the chilling toll of 110,000 victims, both civilians and military men, and four million displaced persons in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt and Syria. Also, almost 1.5 billion dollars were invested in international aid, a billion for bordering countries with refugee camps and the rest for Syria.

### REGIONAL ORIGIN

The student demonstrations against the administration of Daraa were followed by formal demonstrations in the city of Homs and, then, the one- hundred- year- old Aleppo, economic capital of the country.

The president, Bashar al- Assad, thought he could control these protests against him in the same way his father, Hafez al- Assad, had done in 1982 when he calmed a domestic revolution in Homs, destroying different neighborhoods and causing the death of almost 20,000 Syrians.

The controversy became almost a civil war when part of the armed forces defected in clear opposition to the decision to operate against civil population in military terms.

The Free Syrian Army was formed and it initially had 30,000 troops (deserters) at the order of Colonel Riad al- Assad and Malik al- Kurdi, as second chief. Also, it had insurgent popular forces, such as al- Baraa battalion which fights in Damascus and the Ansar al- Jabhat al- Nusra li- Ahl al- Sham Front (translated as the Support Front for the Syrian People) in Aleppo, commanded by Abu Ibrahim. The

latter is composed by Syrians, Moroccans, Lybians, Tunisians and Lebanese related to Al- Qaeda and considered as terrorists by the United States.

The evolution of actions made it possible for the Iraqi Al- Qaeda extension to be present under the name of the Islamic State of Iraq and al- Sham (old name of Great Syria) fighting with the experience acquired in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As random information, the conflict was increased by the religious controversy as there was a confrontation between Alawi governmental troops (12% of the population), related to Shias against a Sunni majority (60%) with the international support of the same denomination which tries to prevent a Shia preponderance caused after the Arab Spring. This confession breakup, which took place in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, has divided Islam between Sunni and Shia.

### OVERLAPPING PROBLEMS

The original *polemos* is complemented by the fact that Syria is the third world arsenal of chemical weapons, particularly of Sarin gas and VX with production and storage facilities in the vicinity of the cities of Aleppo, Homs, Houla, Damascus and near Latakia port.

In addition to this, there is the Kurdish problem which, although it is the greatest ethnic minority in the Middle East, it is not settled as nation- state in any way. Its original territory is divided into Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria and



there are between 55 and 60 million people of Sunni Islam religion (there are no accurate censuses).

The Syrian government supports the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which is opposed to the Turkish government, so its Kurdish followers in Syria are facing the dilemma of fighting for the Syrian rebels of Sunni religion or support the Syrian government.

For the time being, there is the main trend to support the rebels with the idea that, after their success, pursue their independence as nation occupying, by means of a revolution, the land where they live in the four nations.

Among the main combatants in the north of Syria, there are: the Kurdish Islamic Front, the Peshmerga Army, the Mecca Martyr and the so-called Grandsons of Saladin.

Apart from the problems mentioned, there is the insurrection of Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and the Israeli frontiers who, according to their Islam religion, favor the support to one of the contenders. The result of this was a marked anti Sunni crusade in Lebanon due to the alliance between alawites with Hezbollah<sup>1</sup> (of Shia confession), giving rise to armed conflicts in its border with Syria.

Last, the conflict made Sunni Islam Jihadists to meet in Syria to fight against alawites with the purpose of creating a network like Al-Qaeda with international perspective.

### HEGEMONIC POWERS AND SYRIA

The main ally of the Syrian government is Iran which, together with Hezbollah, the Lebanon Islam armed organization, form a Shia regional alliance, called "Axis of Evil" by certain western countries.

Iran, apart from being a political- regional ally, has a mere military influence as it facilitates training, doctrine and logistic support for an eventual impact, by means of Hezbollah, on Israel.

Russia, after Iran, has a long economic relationship regarding the sale of weapons. It is an important client but a strategic partner: it supplies MIG aircrafts, attack helicopters and high technology air defense system. In 1980, it signed a Consulting Agreement in case of threat to peace and for military cooperation that links it to Syria in military terms.

Also, there is a logistic support base in the Syrian port of Tartus that makes it possible for it to exit through the Mediterranean. This city has already been the seat of the 5<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the Mediterranean Soviet Fleet.

Turkey, its nearest neighbor, is the one that deals with controversy as rebels use it as an open border both for the entrance of support and the exit of refugees. It was its main partner because of the Free Trade Agreement signed in 2002, which is in force since 2007 up to the beginning of the confrontation.

Since 2005, the United States have blamed Syria for the death of the Lebanese premier, Rafik Hariri, a fact that affected the regional balance in Lebanon and placed it further from the West and reinforced the prior Syria-Lebanon relationship which was required by the UN Resolution 1559 (September, 2004) for the purposes of withdrawing Syrian troops from Lebanon.

President Obama changed foreign policy in order to make an approach. However, the event at the US embassy in Libya made the conflict be left aside. Today, the United States is searching for a political solution without its own military intervention while the use of chemical weapons is avoided in any sense.

Israel keeps a de facto status quo after its confrontation for the Golan Heights during the Six-Day War occupying territories conquered without any Syrian reaction until that moment.

### MILESTONES

After the protests against the torture on students who made graffiti about the government in Daraa, the government sent tanks to rebel cities against the demonstrators without making the required reforms.

In December, 2011, the Free Syrian Army was organized with military and police deserters as well as civilians with operating base in Turkey. Also, the Syrian National Council and the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change in Syria started to operate in Istanbul.

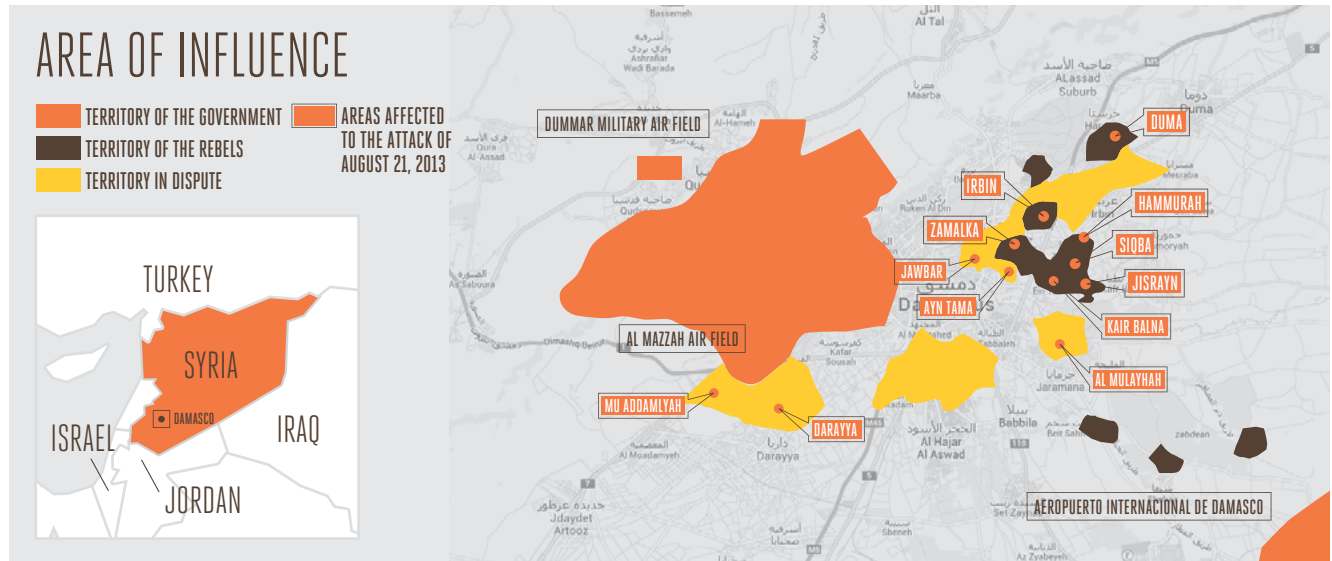
International pressure from the United States and the European Union was increased until the entrance of Syria in the Arab League was cancelled, thus making it possible to force the government's removal from office.

On July 17, 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) considered the conflict a civil war and stated that, therefore, Humanitarian International Law (HIL) was to be applied.

There was an attack in Damascus the following day with a car bomb at the National Security building during which the Minister of Defense, Daoud Rajha and his second-in-command, Assef Shawkat, who was the brother in law and confidant of the president, died. Moreover, the president's brother, Maher al-Assad, was severely injured. This was the turning point of the conflict. As from this moment, there was no turning back for any of the sides.

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1. Translation of "Party of God" (from Hizb, party and Allah, God): Islam Organization from Lebanon that has a political and a paramilitary branch. It was founded in Lebanon in 1982 to respond to the Israeli intervention at that moment and they were trained, organized and founded by a contingent of the Revolutionary Guard of Iran. They receive weapons, training and financial support from Iran and have functioned as a "Syria blessing" since the end of the Civil War in Lebanon. Its leader is the sheik Hasan Nasrallah.



On November 11 of that year, in Doha (Qatar), the Syrian National Council, following the proposal made by the United States of achieving a greater and better representation, chose new members and sheik Ahmad Moaz al- Khatib, an old imam who was respected as moderate national, was elected as president.

Also, it changed its name to National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces with representation of 14 provinces and a Military Revolutionary Council and an Executive Committee were created. There are 66 representatives in this new Council: nine are from the opposition, five are alawites and there is a seat for the Muslim Brotherhood.

As complement for the new Council, 260 rebel commanders chose 30 representatives to be part of the Military Supreme Council which named, by consensus, Brigadier- General Salim Idriss (old professor of the School of War) as Chief of Staff.

In light of the desire for a sectorial political direction according to the efforts made and the undesired consequence of an anarchical direction, *original commanders were sought to be replaced with people who obeyed.*

At the end of December, the UN representative, Ladhjar Brahimi, stated that a transition government with executive authority would be necessary to govern for months until the next elections. Also, it called a meeting in Geneva with representatives from the United States and Russia to collaborate with the creation of this government supported by a Peacekeeping Force to monitor the ceasefire.

By the end of January, 2013, Syria reported that Israeli aircrafts attacked a Research Center in the suburbs of

Damascus and there were two victims but the target sought was not stated.

Sources from the United States said that these Israeli aircrafts attacked with a Syrian column that was going to Lebanon and transported SA- 17 missiles addressed Hezbollah. The Lebanese army confirmed that 12 Israeli aircrafts made two intrusions on the Lebanese air space and did not mention any attack. Israel only stated that it kept the right to carry out preventive actions to avoid a regional weaponry imbalance in favor of Hezbollah.

In February, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, announced during his meeting in Rome with the leader of the Syrian opposition, Mouaz al- Khatib, that his country would support them with food and medicine. Also, it would send 60 million dollars as health and education aid to areas under rebel control.

The Sheik, who was angry, did not thank for the support emphasizing that *rebels are fed up with western complaints about extremists in their ranks*, in clear reference to the Al- Nusra front that operates in Aleppo. He added that the true enemy is the Assad regime but that the West is more concerned only about the length of combatants' beards.

Other European nations, such as the United Kingdom and France, are considering a stop of the embargo on Syria to send lethal weapons (armored vehicles, night goggles and armored vests) to support the rebels.

Saudi Arabia, like the rebels, claims for a greater intervention of the United States that is analyzing to train rebels on the field.

Two political internal situations that are worth mentioning can be added to the complex military evolution.

The sheik Ahmad Badr al- Deen Hassoun, known to be

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Sunni but close to the Syrian government urged *all parents on TV and the graphic media from his country to recruit their children to the Syrian army to defeat a conspiracy of foreign enemies, including the Arab traitor, Zionism and the West.* This can also be interpreted as the lack of enough troops to support the government.

On March 19, the Syrian government and the rebels exchanged some accusations about a lethal attack launched at great height allegedly with chemical weapons in the area of Khan al- Assal, in the north of Aleppo province killing 26 people. The UN started some research on this in response to a formal request made by the Syrian government that blames the rebels on having caused the incident during the visit of president Obama to the Middle East.

The opposition leader, sheik Moaz al- Katib, resigned on March 24 from his office after Ghassan Hitto, a Syrian-American candidate supported by Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected to be prime minister of a transition government that starts to govern over territories freed by the rebels.

Al- Katib declared to be against the idea of forming a coalition government because this proposal, which also included the reincorporation to the Arab League and a greater financial support, would make Syria be divided in two: the northern part for the rebels and the southern part under the current regime.

The Arab League accepted the representatives from the opposition to take the place of Syria during a summit held in Doha (capital of Qatar), who took the seat for the first time since the administration of president Bashar al- Assad was suspended in November, 2011. The decision was made after the emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifah al- Thani, urged other Arab leaders to make a formal invitation. The opposition also demanded the Syrian seat at the UN but Algeria, Iran and Lebanon opposed to this.

In April, Syrian troops, supported by Hezbollah and the Iranian Republican Guard, started a successful second offensive to counterattack rebels in the positions reached near the Jordanian border, in the province of Daraa and in the city of Al- Qusair, near the highway that joins Damascus with the coast of Lebanon, which made it easier to carry weaponry from the Lebanese territory.

In May, the Israeli Air Force made a quick attack on Syria, the target of which was a load of high technology and long distance missiles aimed at Hezbollah. Aircrafts did not enter into Syrian territory, but shot from the Israeli border.

It also attacked the Center for Scientific Research in Jamraya, located in the suburbs of Damascus, causing some casualties among those who manage chemical weapons facilities according to what was informed by the Syrian public television. Russia indicated that because of this attack at least 300 members of Unit 501 of Barzeh district died and there were hundreds of people in four hospitals.

In an interview with Telam agency, President Assad stated that he does not believe that several western countries really desire a solution in Syria and that he doubts about the success of the peace conference in Geneva.

On June 14, the Eager Lion exercise was carried out in Jordan and was made up of 8,000 troops, 5,000 of which belonged to the United States and the rest of them were from other 19 nations with the participation of F- 16 and F- 18 aircrafts.

American officers announced in July that Israel made an air attack in Syria near the Port of Latakia to destroy a warehouse of anti- ship missiles of Yakhont type from Russia. However, officials did not give information about the level of damage or the number of missiles destroyed.

Last, Assad authorized on August 19 the entrance of a group of experts from the UN who, at the request of the Secretary General, are carrying out some research about an alleged use of chemical weapons in Khan al- Assad, near Aleppo, during which 26 people died and both parties accuse each other of having used them.

#### **LAST COMPLICATIONS**

On August 21 at 2am, two rockets with nerve agent – of Sarin type- were launched from a bridge over the highway that joins Damascus and Homs and two other rockets were launched from the Sironex factory in the Qabun neighborhood over the Ghouta neighborhood, an area that supports the rebels.

The purpose was to neutralize an alleged rebel incursion of 300 commanders (trained by the United States in Jordan) who would carry out an attack with tanks, mechanized vehicles and aircrafts. The action resulted in 1,428 casualties, 526 of which were children and 3,600 were injured.

The following day the United States started to prepare, together with France, a surgical attack on military targets that would facilitate the launch of chemical weapons which led to an international warning to prevent a possible worldwide outbreak. For this reason, Pope Francis called for a day on fasting on September 7.



*The UN becomes important as it is the element that, beyond trying to find peaceful solutions, will be responsible for controlling and, eventually, destroying chemical weapons found.*

On September 9, in Moscow, the Minister of Foreign Relations of Russia, Sergei Lavrov, called on Syria to sign and ratify the Convention on Chemical Weapons that bans the production, storage and use of these weapons stating that if there is international control on chemical weapons in Syria, we will be able to prevent attacks and we will immediately start to work with Damascus.

After Russia proposed to avoid an American attack making Syria hand over its chemical weapons, the Minister of Foreign Relations from France, Laurent Fabius, proposed the Security Council to issue a resolution stating Chapter 7 of the UN Charter that allows its members to use military action to enforce their proposals.

On September 13, the Secretary of State of the United States, John Kerry, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov and the envoy of the United States, Lakhdar Brahimi, together with groups of weapon control officials.

The result of the meeting was more complications than possible solutions.

The United States defended the need to carry out a surgical attack in Syria after August 21 to reinforce the message to Iran not to permit the presentation of a nuclear device keeping the armed option as the last resort.

The American decision to adjourn military action in Syria increased Israel's concern about the fact that the credibility of US policy towards Iran would be eroded.

Lavrov highlighted the effort of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, to persuade President Bashar al- Assad to

sign the treaty that prohibits the use of chemical weapons and his initiative to organize the Peace Conference (postponed since May 2013) with representatives from both parties.

In this opportunity, Russia wanted to include Iran while the United States opposed to this and suggested including the group "Friends of Syria", 11 European and Arab nations that have been supporting the Syrian resistance, something that was rejected by Moscow.

Another complication that appeared in Syria is the unlikelihood that the Syrian opposition negotiates because rebel leaders oppose Obama's decision to postpone military action and explore a disarmament plan with the Russians.

However, Secretary Kerry talked to General Idris and Ahmad al- Jarba, military and political leaders of the Syrian opposition and assured that the armed option is still on the table. Moreover, the United States would insist on the fact that any understanding on chemical weapons must be based on the verification and execution of pertinent controls. This statement obfuscated the Russians.

On September 13, Assad publicly announced that his country would enter the Convention on Chemical Weapons. One of the requirements to be part of it is that Syria must submit a statement indicating types, amounts and location of its chemical weapons and the location of all its production facilities 60 days before formally becoming part of the agreement.

On the following day, the United States and Russia reached an agreement by which Syria was requested to remove or destroy all its chemical weapons before mid-2014. According to this agreement signed by the American Secretary of State, John Kerry, and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, international inspectors should be in Syria in November 2013.

Both countries agreed that there are about 1,000 tons of chemical weapons which include SARIN gas and sulfur mustard, stored in 45 places. Half of them have “exploitable amounts”. There is no evidence these have been moved to Iraq or Lebanon as it was accused by the Syrian opposition.

Syria started to comply with its part of the agreement by sending a list of its chemical weapons to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that, at the beginning of October, sent its inspectors to Syrian territory.

At the end of September, after the UN General Assembly, the Security Council issued a resolution on an ambitious plan that prohibits the use, development, production and/or storage or retention of chemical weapons to Syria. This resolution also includes the prohibition to transfer these weapons to other countries under penalty of applying the sanctions established in Chapter 7 of the UN Charter.

The last, and most inspiring, point is the future Geneva II Conference (November, 2013). The United States and Russia imposed, among their conditions, that representatives of Assad and the opposition be present to discuss the future of the country. This adds to the request made by the Moscow for the meeting to be held under the UN umbrella in presence of Iran.

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### **THE FALL OF ASSAD: DIFFERENT INTERESTS**

The fall of Assad’s regime is not as simple as it could be expected. There are many cross, internal and external interests that make the exit from this delicate situation be like disarming a time bomb.

As regards the greatest powers, the United States is trying to favor isolation of Iran without its own military intervention and taking greater caution than in Libya.

The red line to cross for a possible military intervention has already been crossed so it may be used without prior warning in spite of knowing that this decision would not be popular and would have little support from their usual allies.

Russia would reduce its commercial influence and there is doubt about the fact that the Port of Tartus will be used as supply base. However, this could favor the dialogue with Iran.

In the case of Israel, an eventual fall of Assad’s regime would make it difficult to keep the status quo of Golan Heights because of the confrontation with a unit government that has regional and international support.

Iran would lose an ally and would weaken its influence in the region breaking its relationship with Hezbollah and facilitating western action against it. For this purpose, it has an eventual Contingency Plan with insurgents.

The northern neighbor, Turkey, would reinstate its Free Trade Agreement with Syria increasing its regional hegemonic role and contributing to the separation of Iran. Also, it would increase its dialogue with the United States and its role of mediator with Iran.

Although Syria and Iraq are trying to make the Kurdish from both countries reunite, Iraq would not favor the installation of an operation base of Sunni rebels in Syria to prevent actions against it.

Assad’s defeat would favor Sunni power in the Syrian government which means a decrease in the political and military influence of Hezbollah. This scenario would facilitate a new power balance among different religions. This would have an impact on Saudi Arabia and the Sunni from the Gulf who would keep the power of their moderate confession supremacy within the Arab League. It would also favor the decrease in the influence of Iran and its attempt to become a predominant power. It would reduce the weaponry support to Hezbollah and Hamas.

If Bashar al- Assad gets out of the Syrian government, it would be easier to have a pro- western approach of the country being further from Iran and Hezbollah.

The Syrian reunification would be under Sunni control and would have an unknown end improving the relation of religious minorities, among which there are the Kurdish.

### **IN SYRIA, NO SOLUTION IS CLEAN**

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Evolution is still uncertain because neither the Arab League nor the United States, Russia or China will allow for a governmental success that includes killing in a civil war. There is no certainty as to the coming out of the president which allows the access of military rebel organizations that cannot be governed by a weak and heterogeneous political direction.

There is no clear solution that does not spoil principles stated by different actors.

After the eventual surgical operation led by the United States has stopped, the balance of opportunities favors the rebels again because the open use of chemical weapons has not been prohibited to the Syrian government.

Rebels, even without the support of lethal weapons as promised by the West, still have the support of the Arab League and openly begin to receive the support from the CIA.

Russia, as improvised pacifist, cannot do anything but play the role of diplomatic mediator that does not allow it to supply the Syrian government with weapons.

The UN becomes relevant as it is the element that, apart from trying to find peaceful solutions, will be responsible for controlling and, eventually, destroying any chemical weapons found.

With his worldwide vigil, Pope Francis could get the echo to stop military actions of the main powers. This was different from what happened with Benedict XVI.

The government of the United States, affected by having declaimed red lines that it could never enforce and in spite of having prevented war, still has its distance missile capability alert which it will use without prior notice in light of the potential breach of control clauses.

The Syrian situation, beyond the temporary status quo, does not show an easy nor close exit unless there is a military solution. On the contrary, as from the original conflict between the government and the Syrian people, confrontations increased: Sunni against Shia, moderate rebels against extreme Jihadist; Hezbollah against Al- Qaeda; Kurdish against extreme rebels and even a memorable cold war between Russia and the United States.

Also, as Syria accepted an inspection on chemical weapons, there are some other challenges of similar

importance but which require immediate attention:

- › How to protect inspectors during a war under development?
- › How to find a place for the destruction of chemical weapons near the Syrian coast while this is under the control of Assad's government?

In order to assess the role of every participant, both external and internal in a post- conflict scenario, it is necessary to be able to answer the following complex questions:

- › How long will it be possible to keep the international armed mission for the control of chemical weapons without stopping hostilities?
- › Will this control prevent them from being used again?
- › Will Iran let its main regional ally succumb before the popular demands at a stage close to a confronted negotiation with the West?
- › Will the conflict evolve to include Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar on one side and Hezbollah and Iran on the other side?
- › What will the role of Turkey, the only pro-Western Islamic hegemonic power be?
- › What will the situation of Israel and Lebanon be during the post- conflict situation with relation to Syria and between them?
- › Will the Kurdish continue their struggle for independence and the formation of their desired Kurdistan?
- › Will Syria be divided into three parts?

Is the friendly goodbye after the conversation between president Rohani from Iran and president Obama from the United States credible for the future of the Middle East?<sup>2</sup>

During an interview of Bashar al- Assad with CBS, after the gas attack, the President warned that small wars lead to big wars. In return, nothing better than the words of president Putin in "A call on precaution from Russia" published in The New York Times, in which, he expresses that: We are all different but when we ask for God's blessings, we must not forget that God has created all of us as equal.

*Insha'Allah* (may God want) that in a region that may directly call the heavens of the main monotheistic confessions, communication is not interfered with so that the prayers of so many souls in pain can be clearly heard before the noises of war affect communication. ■■■

› REFEREE ARTICLE

2. Author's note: This conversation between the presidents of the United States and Iran took place at the end of the UN Assembly. President Rohani was going to the airport when he called Mr. Obama to discuss how to make the West reduce their pressure of embargoes over Iran as from the moment they allow for inspections of their nuclear development. This conversation was 15 minutes long and ended with the wish, from both sides, to have a nice day and the answer in farsi.