

ORSAM INTERVIEWS ON REGIONAL AFFAIRS

No.18, AUGUST 2015



ORSAM

ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES
مركز الشرق الأوسط للدراسات الاستراتيجية



KHALED KHOJA: POLITICAL SOLUTION IN SYRIA SHOULD BEGIN WHERE GENEVA-II ENDED

Khaled Khoja



Khaled Khoja, who is the president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, (commonly known as Syrian National Coalition) was born in 1965 in Damascus. After being detained twice during the rule of President Hafez Al-Assad twice, he first went to Libya and then Turkey. He was graduated from the Faculty of Medicine in 1994 in Izmir. Following the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, he founded Platform for Solidarity in March 2011 and he was one of the founding members of the Syrian National Council in October 2011. Khaled Khoja, who has great contributions in the foundation of the Syrian National Coalition, acted as the Representative of the Coalition to Turkey until he was elected as the president.

ORSAM: Could you make an overall evaluation of the revolution in Syria and evolution of the armed conflict in the aftermath? What were the main dynamics of the revolution? What are the reasons behind revolution's turning into an armed struggle?

Khaled Khoja: We have left behind the 53rd month since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, in other words, it has been four and half years. As you know, the revolution was an ordinary protest movement at the beginning. Civilian activists and the people were the essential dynamic of the protests. They had very simple demands. It was almost the same with the slogans of the Arab Spring wave: freedom and honor. However, after the Syrian regime used its military force and escalated violence, the protests turned into armed struggle. Then, Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed and it launched an armed struggle against Assad for one and half year. That was a successful struggle. At the time, until the end of 2012, all regimes in the region were falling one after another: Hosni Mubarak after Bin Ali and Qaddafi after Mubarak. Afterwards, Ali Abdullah Saleh fled his country as well. In the same line Assad was also withdrawing. He lost his hope to control whole Syr-

ia, and withdrew from rural areas to urban centers.

At the end of 2012, Assad felt a serious threat in Damascus. The presidential palace was targeted. Then, Iran factor became a part of the equation. In parallel, the region's regimes started a counter-revolutionary movement after feeling a sense of threat. That happened to take place when the Syrian National Coalition was being formed in Doha at the end of 2012. While we were expecting to see a serious change in a couple of months, counterrevolutionaries came together and Assad regime stayed in power. The turning point in Syria was when Hezbollah took control of the city of Qusayr in June 2013 and two months after that Assad regime used chemical weapons and massacred people in Guta. Assad bought time from the US by giving its chemical weapons away. As you know, the mastermind behind the plan was the Russians. Since then, although the US is making statements saying that Assad has no place in Syria's future, the regime was *de facto* supported for survival, and the initiative was in the hands of Russians. Today we see it very clearly that the Russians have the political initiative and they support Assad militarily at a serious level.

ISIS factor is also very important. ISIS gained signifi-

cant power, after seizing Mosul, then 19th Brigade, which is the biggest military unit in Raqqa, military airport, and lastly Tedmur in May 2015. After the military equipment and financial gains in Mosul, ISIS acquired significant military and financial resources in Raqqa and Tedmur as well. ISIS has the control over 90% of the oil fields in eastern Syria and obtains income by selling oil and natural gas to the regime. Of course, all these turned the Syrian question into a proxy war from a simple demand for freedom and the Syrian regime has lost control over the country. According to the studies of two different research institutions, the Syrian regime has control over 16% of Syria. Assad confessed this fact in his last speech. He said that he withdrew towards Damascus and the recruitment to the army is very low. He introduced a very dangerous interpretation of the notion of citizenship, By saying "A citizen is the person who defends Syria, not the person who is born and grow up in Syria" he legitimized Iran and its invasion. All these indicate that the regime and Assad are falling.

On the other hand, while Syria's south and north are controlled by the FSA, the coastal area and even Damascus are experiencing a serious demographical change. The

coastal region is a stronghold of Assad; however, with the migration from east and north the demographical balance changed in favor of Sunnis. In Damascus, the Iran-Hezbollah controlled Homs and Hama, demographical balance changes in favor of Iran. If this situation is left as it is, it will lead to a bigger chaos than the one we see now. Syria's turning into Somalia will become a possibility if it continues like this. Of course, Turkey's joining to the coalition, its desire to form a safe zone in the north, and launch of a fight against PKK and ISIS is an opportunity for us. Because, while we are fighting against Assad troops, ISIS is stabbing us in the back in the industrial zone in northern Aleppo, Mumbuch, Jarabulus, and Al Bab. This is why if the safe zone is formed, it will relieve the region which we call our "backyard" and allow us to keep Aleppo under control. We will have the position to lead within Syria as both political and military opposition. This would be a game changer. This is the current military situation. Politically, Russia wants to begin political discussions in order to prevent the scenario I am describing. As of the moment, it controls the political arena in Syria by taking world's approval or silence to its behind. If you look through De Mistura's report to the United

Iran's approach seeks to save not the regime, but Assad. Russia, on the other hand, wants to save the regime.



Nations (UN), there are suggestions that Russia and Iran would like to see. A political solution that bypasses Geneva decisions will support the regime that way. It will not only save the regime, but also Assad. For this reason, while we accept the Geneva Declaration as political solution, we do not find any suggestions or projects that bypass Geneva appropriate. If there is a political solution, it should begin where Geneva-II ended. Both sides, the regime and the opposition, would agree on a transitional government and lead transition on the basis of the principle of mutual acceptance. Then, elections would take place, Syrian people would elect who they want, establish a new parliament, and a new constitution would be written. Otherwise, from our perspective, it is not possible to reduce the problem to a war against terrorism or early elections. Syrian people will not accept this sort of maneuvers.

At this point, as you mentioned, Iran has initiatives that highlights different points, be it elections or counterterrorism. They label their initiative as four points. On the other hand, there are Russian initiatives. Starting from this point, there are arguments that suggest that Iran and Russia compete to keep Assad regime under their control. It is said that especially the last Russian initiative aims to prevent Assad regime to fall completely into Iran's control. What do you think about this?

We see that there has been nuance between Russia and Iran in these four and half years. Although Russia states that they do not accept Assad's departure as a precondition, we do not see they insist on that. Assad's alternatives could be debated by the Russians. However, we do not see this in Iran. Iran has invested

in the Assad family, beginning with Hafez Assad and continuing with Bashar Assad. Iran's approach seeks to save not the regime, but Assad. Russia, on the other hand, wants to save the regime. Russia wants to protect its interests through some people in Syria. This is the difference. Meanwhile, Egypt also seeks to act as a regional power going in-between. Egypt, however, is looking for a Sisi-style false opposition. It has a different approach from Iran and Russia. However, Egypt's becoming prominent is a low possibility. On the other hand, all initiatives of Russia, Iran, and Egypt are maneuvers to bypass the Geneva Declaration, accepted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). For this reason, although there is nuance between the stances of these states, Syrian people, who have more than 300,000 martyrs, do not approach them positively. I do not think that they will approach positively after this point.

Let us talk about the displacement of people demographically as you mentioned. The area under the regime's control has shrunk, but, when we consider internal splits within the groups, the emergence of ISIS, and Kurdish controlled areas, we see that

there is a *de facto* fragmentation on the ground. You mentioned the notion of citizenship; it is also transforming during this process. What sort of a perspective does the current situation present to us regarding the future of Syria? What can you say about the question of Syria's unity?

First of all, although ISIS controls geographically half of the country, there is no population density in the area it controls; it is dominant in Raqqa. It is the western Syria that is the most densely populated. If we look at PYD, we see that PYD has temporarily established its cantons and created a *de facto* separatist situation. There is no territorial link between the cantons. In the long run, it is not possible for Afrin, Ayn al Arab, and Qamishli cantons to continue to exist separately. Also for Assad, it is not possible to unite Damascus and the coastal region and establish a new government as of now. In the short run, it is true that there is such a fragmentation. Southern Syria is controlled by a different FSA. In Aleppo, there is a more moderate FSA. Due to the presence of Al Nusra, Jundul Aqsa and Ahrar, Idlib is perceived as a different administration, but it is a *de facto* situation that occurred

With the safe zone, refugees would return to their land, getting humanitarian aid would become easier, understanding of civilian government would become prevalent, and the fight against terrorism and radicalism would be easier. For this reason, safe zone means stability.

in the short term. This *de facto* situation might evolve into *status quo* in short or mid-run, but in the long run, these will be dissolved. If the safe zone that Turkey wants to establish in northern Syria becomes successful, the process of getting away from danger would begin with FSA's gathering strength, civil administration's establishment, and refugees getting back to their land. For this reason, we think the safe zone is very important. Terror and fragmentation happens where chaos exists; however, when there is stability, there is no fragmentation, but welfare. As I've said, with the safe zone, refugees would return to their land, getting humanitarian aid would become easier, understanding of civilian government would become prevalent, and the fight against terrorism and radicalism would be easier. For this reason, safe zone means stability.

You envision the process leading to a solution, step by step. In this context, you have diplomatic contacts where you represented the Coalition. Especially you have had contacts with the US and some western countries, which are important actors in this crisis. How do you evaluate their positions? Is there a change in their understanding, which is close to the vision you have mentioned?

What all western countries talk about is stability. We talk about it as well; however, their approach is different. What they see is terror. Now they also see Assad as menace, but they see terrorism as the direct threat to themselves. Yet, we tell them when we visit them: Assad himself and his intelligence organizations are the roots of terrorism. Besides, what is meant with terrorism is not just conducted by the



organizations of Sunni origin. It is true, ISIS is turning everywhere into bloodshed, a very scary one; however, there are other terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah, Abu Fadl Abbas, and fighters that Iran brought from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The ferocities by these organizations are not shown. Even more, before ISIS entered Syria, its methods were applied by the militias on the regime side. That is why, for us, Assad's presence means the continuation of terrorism. As long as Assad and his regime exist, Sunni and Shia terrorist groups will be produced; because their factory is Assad's intelligence units. When we say this, western countries comprehend it, but they want to see themselves immune from the attacks. In the fight against terrorism, as FSA, we support train and equip program initiated by the US and other programs. We operationally participate in these. Russia seems to have taken the initiative diplomatically, but with this understanding, which defends Assad and the regime, it is not possible to start a political solution. Western countries also see this. Assad will not come near to a political solution; he stated this in his last speech. My prediction is that, if military balance on the ground changes, and terrorism and ISIS are eliminated, FSA will take control of the territories

that once it was controlling. At this point, Assad would be squeezed seriously and have to accept the conditions of the Geneva Declaration. Otherwise, I do not see the beginning of the political negotiations will become possible by preserving the *status quo*.

As the Coalition, you face some dilemmas. Reflecting from inside, can you make a self-criticism, especially during your presidency? In which dimensions could the Coalition have followed different paths? What were the mistakes?

We, as the Coalition, have a structure that is in conformity with stable democracies, not a situation of revolution. In my opinion, the formation of the Coalition that way was a fundamental mistake, because the decisions are made through competition and conflict on a democratic ground. The Coalition involves all ethnic elements in Syria and the whole political spectrum, such as the Kurdish groups, Arab tribal representatives, liberals, FSA representatives, local government representatives and Muslim Brotherhood. So, the National Coalition for the Syrian Opposition and the Revolutionary Forces has a quasi-parliamentary structure. In my opinion, this model does not comply with the

For us, Assad's presence means the continuation of terrorism. As long as Assad and his regime exist, Sunni and Shia terrorist groups will be produced.

revolutionary situation. This is our main mistake. When I began my presidency, I said that we will devise a consensus mechanism, rather than differentiation. We could not achieve it due to structural problems. We took steps to bring FSA under one roof. It will be concluded in the upcoming days. We abolished the former military committee. We are establishing a new High Military Command with sixty members from all active groups. It will be led by a chief of general staff. This command will be more realistic in reflecting the ground and have stronger relations with the Coalition. We initiated this step six months ago and it has come to an end point. Our relations with the groups on the ground are good; and now we strengthened it even more. Unfortunately, politically we could not get the assistance that we expected from the countries that make up the Group of Friends of the Syrian People. Even the support is almost gone. No support is coming from Trust Fund; nothing has come through the interim government. For conducting political activities, we, as the Coalition, are in need of financial resources. When I became the president, this money was coming from international allies, more precisely from regional friends. However, today this support is gone and we continue under

very troubled conditions. Turkey's support continues in the same way since the beginning. As of now, only Turkey truly supports the Coalition, the Syrian opposition.

You personally have a special position in the Syrian opposition, considering your Turkmen background. Has it ever been an obstacle in your struggle? Have you ever faced such a situation?

It has never been an obstacle. I was not elected because of my Turkmen identity. I formed in 2005 the Turkish branch of the Damascus Declaration, which is the first opposition group that encompassed the whole political spectrum and I was their representative in Turkey. I did not join the Coalition due to my Turkmen identity; I joined it owing to my activist identity and helped almost all of the opponents that came to Turkey. I was not elected since I was Turkmen or I was staying Turkey or I was a Turkish citizen. I was elected by different political groups, because I have genuinely approached all groups equally and proactively during the last four and a half years. Liberals presented me as a candidate, but also the Kurdish National Council voted for me. It was the same in the second election. Kurds, local

councils and armed groups' representatives elected me. I've never used my identity and relations with Turkey as leverage to rise in the Coalition and I am not doing this.

It seems it has not been a disadvantage for you?

It has not. I do not take what foreign media claims serious.

A dimension of the Syrian crisis is the displacement of millions of people. There are Syrians displaced within the country, fled to neighboring and third countries, and seeking refuge in European countries in different ways. There is a dramatic picture when we look at the crisis in terms of refugee dimension. Do you have any efforts about the Syrian refugees? You are busy with military and political dimensions and internal transition, but what are your endeavors for the Syrian refugees who had to flee the country? In case of return to peace after the crisis is resolved, do you have any preparations regarding their return to Syria?

The most radical solution for the refugee problem is to

establish safe zones, because refugees often run away from barrel bombs. The FSA is able to maintain security on the ground, but the most important factor that deepens the crisis is the insecure atmosphere that aerial strikes cause.

Actually you are saying that the refugee problem could have been resolved before people became refugees.

Yes, it is the same now. If safe zones in Syria are established, refugees will go back. Within a certain period of time, returns from both south and north will be observed. However, unfortunately with the US resisting to the idea and vetoing the plan for establishing a safe zone, the problem still continues to exist. There are around two million refugees in Turkey. Turkey is the country where refugees enjoy the best conditions. I've visited others, in Lebanon there are not even camps. People are trying to survive by setting their own tents and taking shelter in abandoned and collapsed buildings. This refugee crisis is not regional, it is international. Regional countries are trying to help; however, international community, especially UN's institutions remained inadequate for this subject. What

As of now, only Turkey truly supports the Coalition, the Syrian opposition.



creates this refugee problem is the chaotic environment in Syria. I repeat, if the crisis continues like this, we might face even bigger refugee waves. Pro-Assad militia used this slogan since the beginning: “Either Assad stays or we burn down the country.” Another one was “Either Assad or no one”. This regime will exterminate the Syrian people in order to keep Assad in power. This problem will be reproduced by the Syrian regime again and again. Barrel bombs, chemical weapons, and chlorine gas are being used constantly and that is why refugee crisis keeps growing. The UN did not implement its Resolution 2118. UN said that it might impose coercive measures within the framework of Chapter 7, but Assad used chemical weapons anyway, and UN could not carry out its duty. It could not provide the needed help for the refugees. For this reason, some countries are very inadequate in providing assistance to the refugees; such as Jordan,

Lebanon, and Northern Iraq. Some countries like Egypt use refugees as a tool in their domestic politics. That is why if the crisis in Syria continues like this, the refugee problem will not become easy to cope with. Safe zones in order to end the crisis should definitely be formed. Syrian crisis can be resolved by taking the Geneva Declaration as the basis, forcing the party who left the table to get back to the table, and bringing stability to Syria. It cannot be resolved in any other way.

You mentioned De Mistura. He had different initiatives. Actually Syrian crisis has been like a guinea pig for the international diplomatic initiatives. Different models have been tried out. Even De Mistura’s initiatives, such as his proposal of freeze zone in Aleppo, could not go beyond being an intellectual exercise, but

caused serious time loss. Afterwards, he invited different groups to Geneva and met them. Then, as a result of the report he presented to the UN, the idea of working groups emerged. What do you think about this latest initiative?

Regarding the working groups, De Mistura invited 216 people that he had previously chosen to Geneva for consultation. 130 of this 216 people remained anonymous. After the consultation, De Mistura wants to form four working groups from the people and groups he invited to deal with the issues of constitution, security, counterterrorism, reconstruction and domestic peace. By this way, the main issue of the interim government, which Assad's representatives wanted to keep away from the table at Geneva-II, is being postponed.

He had an argument, like let us listen to the voices on the field. There is secrecy in the names due to security concerns, but this leads to the question marks of course.

Of course, there are question marks. We talk to the groups on the field, the opposition, and even the opposition in the gray area. When we asked them if they offered such a thing, they say no. De

Mistura says: "It emerged as a result of the consultation meetings I have conducted." De Mistura wants four working groups to be formed, to discuss technical issues. He also wants the regime, the opposition and a third party that De Mistura himself chooses to discuss the topics that he points out. I think, at this point, De Mistura and his team are doing process engineering. Because here again, the regime and the FSA will not come together and talk on Syria's security. Again, the regime will be somewhere and the FSA will be somewhere else, if that happens. As opposition, there is one group close to Moscow and one group close to Egypt. Another opposition group emerged in Astana. These will give separate suggestions; De Mistura will evaluate them, and then say that the four groups gave such suggestions. However, where is the Geneva Declaration at this point, where is the interim government? They are not present. The topic of technical issues is an exercise similar to De Mistura's suggestion for a ceasefire in Aleppo, which was emptied by the regime. I think it will just be a loss of time. If the UN is genuinely serious about the issue, it should first respect the UNSC Resolution 2118 and then implement it. The Geneva Negotiations should be revived this way. Otherwise, UN should

Syrian crisis can be resolved by taking the Geneva Declaration as the basis, forcing the party who left the table to get back to the table, and bringing stability to Syria. It cannot be resolved in any other way.

stay away from this sort of bypass mechanisms.

In conclusion, is there anything you would like to add?

We are experiencing a process in Syria that very few observer and analysts are able to forecast. Syrian crisis is a central problem. After four and a half years, we see that Syria is a country on which both regional and international actors still have their hands. The persistence of Syrian crisis as a proxy war might turn the whole region into a chaotic environment. For this reason, nobody should have the luxury to leave the process on its own course. Intervention is needed. ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliated groups are serious threats to everyone. Shiite groups controlled

by Iran, such as Hezbollah, present similar levels of threat. The crisis should be precluded from getting bigger by fighting against these groups and their supporters. It should be kept in mind that Assad regime's intelligence is the core of the problems. This is why it is not possible to talk about any solution as long as Assad remains in power. I see the light at the end of the tunnel with Turkey's last move. Let me say this, Syrian revolution will definitely complete itself. In order to do this, it will continue its fight until the revolution's goals, both political and military, are realized.

We would like to thank you very much for this pleasant interview, and wish you success in your endeavors.

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

© Content of this report is copyrighted to ORSAM. Except reasonable and partial quotation and use under the Act No. 5846, Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, via proper citation, the content may not be used or re-published without prior permission by ORSAM. The views expressed in this report reflect only the opinions of its authors and do not represent the institutional opinion of ORSAM.



ORSAM

Ortadoğu Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi (ORSAM)

Süleyman Nazif Sokak No: 12-B Çankaya / Ankara

Tel: 0 (312) 430 26 09 Fax: 0 (312) 430 39 48

www.orsam.org.tr