

# UN, Arab League, Russia Warn: Syria Now on the Edge of Hell

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Dec. 31—Syria is on the very edge of Hell, and in danger of collapsing into the condition of a failed state. These are the warnings issued by UN-Arab League Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, following an intense week of diplomacy in Damascus, Moscow, and Cairo, aimed reviving the Geneva agreements of June 2012, for achieving a political solution to the two-year crisis.

Brahimi spent the last week of December in Damascus, meeting with President Bashar al-Assad, other government officials, and leaders of the internal opposition. On Dec. 29, Brahimi flew to Moscow for meetings with Lavrov and Russian Special Envoy to Syria Mikhail Bogdanov.

At the end of the Moscow meetings, Brahimi and Lavrov announced plans for a trilateral meeting, in early January, among Brahimi, Bogdanov, and U.S. State Department official William Burns—the second such meeting since early December. From Moscow, Brahimi went on to Cairo, where he met with top Arab League officials and with Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.

At the conclusion of the week of diplomacy, Brahimi and Lavrov announced a new ceasefire plan, one that likely represents the last-best hope to avert a total disintegration of Syria, leading to a larger regional conflict and, perhaps, a general war.

The question is whether the combined diplomatic weight of Washington, Moscow, and the UN can prevail on the Saudi and Qatari-armed and -financed op-

position to sit down with representatives of the Assad government to work out a power-sharing and transitional agreement, starting with a ceasefire.

## **Military Stalemate**

The reality on the ground in Syria is that neither side can, under present circumstances, achieve a military victory. Over the past 48 hours, the Syrian Army defeated the rebels in a major battle near Homs. The forces loyal to President Assad cannot absolutely defeat the rebels and control the entire national territory. The rebels cannot take over the capital city of Damascus.

Under these conditions of stalemate, the opposition forces are more and more dominated by radical Sunni factions, heavily financed and armed from the Persian Gulf states. The al-Nusra Front, an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), is by far the best organized and financed of all of the armed rebel factions. The group has been placed on the U.S. State Department List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, yet all of the other armed rebel factions have defended al-Nusra because it is the most effective fighting force. It is becoming clear, as has been openly stated by Brahimi and others, that Syria, under al-Nusra domination, could become a new hotbed of global terrorism, as did Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 1980s Western-sponsored mujahideen war to drive out the Soviet Army.

According to a report by the German intelligence agency, BND, made public last week, Syria is already

emerging as a hub of international terrorism. European jihadists have been recruited to go to Syria, not so much to fight the Assad regime, as to be part of a new terrorism center, targeting Western European nations.

Jordanian intelligence has issued a dire warning as well, that the warfare inside Syria, which has already spilled over into Lebanon, will soon engulf both Jordan and Israel, creating the conditions for a much larger conflict. One senior U.S. Pentagon advisor warned at a recent conference in Washington, that the world is now in "July 1914," just months before the outbreak of World War I. At that time, as could happen now, a series of nominally regional conflicts, involving leading world powers, erupted into general war. The same point was made by Lyndon LaRouche in his weekly international webcast on Dec. 28.

## Hell on Earth

Another clear indication that Syria is in the process of degenerating into a failed state, just as Lavrov and Brahimi warned, is a report published Dec. 27 in the London *Guardian*, which reported on a series of recent assassinations of rebel leaders, carried out by other rebel groups, fighting over the spoils of war. In the Aleppo area in the north of Syria, which is also the industrial heartland of the country, rival rebel factions have shifted their attention from fighting the Syrian Army to looting the population of precious resources, from food to weapons to industrial products and raw materials. The degeneration into widespread looting is but one factor in Brahimi's warnings that Syria is on the verge of becoming a "new Somalia" in the eastern Mediterranean.

Another clear indication of a descent into barbarism came from eyewitness accounts by a leading Catholic figure inside Syria. Sister Agnes-Mariam, mother superior of the Monastery of St. James the Mutilated, has been on an international tour for the last several months, seeking to arouse the conscience of, especially Europeans, over their support for the bestial jihadi movement in Syria. Well-known for her reports of rebel atrocities against Christians, including exposing that it was the rebels, not the Assad government, which carried out the Houla massacre, Sister Agnes-Mariam left Syria under fear of abduction, but is planning to return soon, to lead a new reconciliation movement.

On Dec. 30, the London *Sunday Times* printed the latest shocking revelation from Sister Agnes-Mariam: the story of the beheading and dismemberment of a

young Christian man, allegedly because his brother had charged the rebels with being bandits.

Andrei Arbashe, according to the *Times* account, was a young man who had recently been married, and was about to become a father. "They beheaded him, cut him into pieces, and fed him to the dogs," said Agnes-Mariam. "The uprising has been hijacked by Islamist mercenaries who are more interested in fighting a holy war than in changing the government. It's turned into a sectarian conflict, one in which Christians are paying a high price."

The highly educated Carmelite nun, who is of Palestinian and Lebanese descent, says that 300,000 of Syria's 2 million Christians have been displaced by the conflict, including threats by the Islamic extremists. "It's a scandal that the free and democratic world is supporting extremists," she said in reference to Western backing for the anti-Assad coalition.

## A Moment of Decision

As NATO builds up Patriot missile batteries, AWACS surveillance planes, and ground forces in the region over the coming weeks, the danger that Syria will become a trigger for a global confrontation, drawing in the United States, Russia, and China, will grow. Russian military advisors are reported to be in Syria, manning a new generation of anti-aircraft batteries, opening the possibility of a direct confrontation between Russia and NATO. Even if that larger conflict is avoided, Syria will remain a flashpoint for a much larger regional war, a sectarian conflict, like the Balkan wars of the 1990s.

Ahmad al-Khatib, the head of the Saudi-Qatari-EU-U.S.-backed opposition, has been invited by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to meet in a "neutral capital," such as Cairo or Geneva, to review the new Russia-UN ceasefire plan. Al-Khatib, a Muslim Brotherhood-linked cleric, has said that the departure of Assad is a precondition for any talks; but Brahimi told reporters and Russian officials that Assad has indicated he is not willing to leave office until his Presidential term expires in 2014.

Unless this stalemate is broken, by intense Russian-American pressure, Syria will, indeed, descend into Hell on Earth in the immediate days and weeks ahead. Under those circumstances, the prospect of more direct NATO intervention greatly increases, along with the danger of Syria being the trigger for world war, even thermonuclear world war.