



Meet the mystery fixer who negotiated Syria out of seven years of war

 RANIA KHALEK · AUGUST 2, 2018



How a nearly unknown businessman named Khaled al-Ahmad became Damascus’ secret liaison to the West and quietly dealt Syria’s grinding war to a close.

By Rania Khalek

This is part 1 of a two-part series on the peace and reconciliation process in Syria. You can [read part 2 here](#).

BEIRUT, LEBANON - After seven years of grinding war, the Syrian government has achieved victory. According to current and former international officials and diplomats as well as UN officials, credit or blame for the Syrian government’s recent victories in East Ghouta and then in the south — along with the tacit acceptance these sweeping military successes received — can be placed on one man.

He is Khaled al-Ahmad, a Syrian government emissary and businessman who masterminded the Syrian government’s reconciliation strategy. Al-Ahmad is the secret diplomat who has exerted exceptional tolls of energy building bridges with the enemies of Damascus. Despite his central role in bringing one of the worst conflicts since World War Two to an end, he remains almost totally unknown in international media and has scarcely been discussed even among expert Syria observers.

Bashar al Assad’s victory was made clear by the middle of July of this year, when multiple Israeli outlets confirmed that Israel’s government was cooperating with Russia to facilitate the return of Syrian forces and UN observers to the pre-2011 border with the occupied Golan Heights. Prime Minister Netanyahu himself **stated** that he had no objection to Assad’s rule while his defense minister even allowed for the **possibility** of diplomatic relations between the two countries. These statements were met with embarrassed silence by the Syrian government and its allies like the Lebanese political party and militia, Hezbollah, but they marked a striking shift in Israeli policy.

With Russian support, Syrian armed forces initiated a march to the southern borders of Jordan and Israel this July. The operation turned out to be a cakewalk. This success followed the recapture of East Ghouta and northern Homs, themselves relatively easy taken compared to the grinding battles of previous years. The reassertion of Syrian government authority over the south has as its final target the reopening of the Naseeb border crossing with Jordan and full restoration of the pre-2011 situation in the south. The US has not objected, and in fact, has even sent a message to its former anti-Assad proxies in Syria informing them that **they were on their own**. Israel and Jordan, for their part, made it clear they had no objections either, as long the operation was strictly Syrian, with no visible Iranian or Shia militia role in the battles.

The battles in this phase were limited and not as brutal as they have sometimes been elsewhere. Many towns or rebel groups were not involved in the fighting and others quickly agreed to deals. This may have surprised some observers unfamiliar with the events that took place on the ground in 2015 and 2016, when tens of deals were struck secretly with rebel groups in the south. These deals helped thwart the 2015 Southern Storm operation launched by rebels when one of the main factions called Ababil Horan betrayed its allies. It

was through this process that al-Ahmad laid the foundation for the end of Syria’s war.

The man behind the deals

In dozens of towns, villages, and cities across Syria, reconciliation agreements have brought fighting to a halt. Some people call them truces, others refer to them as settlements and those staunchly opposed to them call them forced surrenders. Whatever one’s preferred label, there’s no denying that the reconciliation process has been vital to the de-escalation of violence Syria has witnessed over the past two years.

The reconciliation process was initiated in 2015, when Khaled al-Ahmad carried a message to Berlin. There, he met with representatives of the Southern Front, a coalition of Western and Saudi-backed rebel groups that operate in Southern Syria and received support from the US-run Military Operations Center (MOC) in Jordan. That same message was delivered to faction leaders from the Southern Front in Jordan and the south. Some leading commanders even secretly entered Damascus to meet security chiefs before returning to the south. This series of exchanges formed the basis of the southern ceasefire agreement and ultimately became the Russian-American de-escalation zone.

Coordinated with Wafiq Nasr, who was at the time the head of security for the south and one of the most respected security officials in Syria, the offer held that the Southern Front would be allowed to administer the south on behalf of the Syrian government. One Western observer described it as offering the opposition in southern Syria the chance to become the “Palestinian Authority of the south,” a cynical analogy that painted the opposition as a toothless vassal, with the Syrian government as a stand-in for the Israeli occupation.

Pragmatic as it might have been, the division of Syria into de-escalation zones was at first opposed by then-Secretary of State John Kerry. The top US diplomat wanted a national Cessation of Hostilities instead, but when that failed, the Americans came around to the proposal. Following a 2017 visit to Moscow by former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and his policy chief Brian Hook, Trump personally signed off on the plan.

In a seven year war where so many previously unknown figures have gained worldwide notoriety, al Ahmad managed to remain largely anonymous. One of the few observers to pick up on Al Ahmad’s importance was the neoconservative operative Tony Badran, a fellow at the Washington-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies. Badran observed that al Ahmad had briefly appeared in the media in 2012 when emails to Assad were leaked showing him to be some kind of advisor to the Syrian president. Badran **described** Al Ahmad as “a man who would emerge at the center of the White House’s channel to Assad. Remember that name. Ahmad appears in the **correspondence** as an adviser of sorts to Assad; a troubleshooter active on the ground and offering **counsel** on issues ranging from security policy to monetary policy.”

Badran also noted Al Ahmad’s connections to then-Al Jazeera journalist Nir Rosen, adding that “Ahmad’s connection with Rosen would endure, and ultimately intersect with, other, bigger channels Assad tasked Ahmad with. Namely, contact with the White House.”

Al Ahmad resurfaced again in a **December 2015 article in the Wall Street Journal**, which revealed that his contacts with the Obama White House began in late 2013 when he met Robert Ford, the Special Envoy for Syria, to offer collaboration between Assad and the US in fighting terrorism. The article also revealed that it was al Ahmad who in 2015 arranged for Steven Simon to visit Damascus and meet Assad. Simon had been head of Middle East policy in Obama’s White House until 2012 and at the time of his secret mission to Damascus he was at the Middle East Institute in Washington. The Gulf-funded institute fired him after his Damascus trip.

The Wall Street Journal article revealed that Simon and al Ahmad had met “at least twice before the Damascus trip.” This counter terror approach would prove fruitful over time as the ISIS threat grew, and al Ahmad eventually brought officials from the anti-ISIS coalition to Damascus to meet security chiefs.

In addition, Simon met with his successor at the White House, Robert Malley, before and after the trip to Damascus to coordinate the message. The connection with Malley is significant because in 2015 and 2016, al Ahmad secretly met with him in the Middle East while he was still at the White House and again at a global conference called the Oslo Forum, where al Ahmad was described as a “senior strategic adviser.”

In September 2014, Malley commissioned Nir Rosen, now working for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, “a Swiss-based private diplomacy organization,” to publish an informal but influential paper on de-escalating the Syrian war. The arguments and proposals featured in Rosen’s paper - which was first reported on in **Foreign Policy** and is published **here in full** for the first time - appear to have been vindicated four years later.

(Rosen’s full paper is embedded at the end of this article.)

The paper promoted de-escalation, local ceasefires and freezing the conflict as the solution for the Syrian war. These recommendations were adopted by UN special envoy Staffan De Mistura when he proposed his Aleppo Freeze. It appears that De Mistura’s draft for the Aleppo Freeze was written by Al Ahmad and Rosen and then personally approved by Assad, only to be ultimately rejected by the opposition and their foreign backers. UN sources say it was Rosen who led a delegation of De Mistura’s staff to Aleppo to help plan the ill-fated freeze.

It’s hard not to see in these negotiations a clever and ultimately successful Assad policy of using Al Ahmad, the urbane English speaking face of the Syrian government, to influence White House and UN policy on Syria. By sending al Ahmad to Moscow and to Oslo to meet with Russians, Assad was able to manipulate the Russians, implanting his own ideas in the minds of their officials, preventing them from proposing ideas the government would not accept, and instead pitching initiatives like the Sochi talks which changed the parameters of what could be discussed in international settings.

Still, not all Western officials are enamored with al Ahmad. One Swiss diplomat, who like most people I contacted for this article agreed to talk only on a voice call on the application Whatsapp, accused al Ahmad of having blood on his hands. Others dismissed him as a smuggler and regime enabler.

In a [second article](#) by Badran, the neoconservative operative drew a more explicit connection between Rosen, al Ahmad and the American foreign policy establishment.

“Malley met in Washington with journalist Nir Rosen, who has a close relationship with the Assad regime. Following his meeting with Malley, Rosen [authored](#) an unpublished pro-Assad report making the case for local cease-fires—which have been an instrument of warfare for the regime camp. Malley distributed Rosen’s report, which, naturally, was also [leaked](#) to David Ignatius. Simon’s and Lynch’s pieces floated the approach favored by Malley and the White House in much cleaner form and venues than the tarnished Rosen.” Behind all this was al Ahmad.

In the interest of full disclosure I must admit that I met Al Ahmad’s brother, Tariq, in a 2017 reporting trip in Damascus. Tariq is an official in the reformist wing of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), part of the country’s ruling coalition that believes in a greater Syria encompassing all of the Levant. Repeated attempts to contact Khaled al Ahmad have failed, and his close partners, Syrian and Western, largely refused to respond to requests for information.

The strategy

Al Ahmad’s strategy appears to have involved two steps. The first was convincing the West and the US that there was a state and it should be preserved, the second was to support reconciliation as a way to build a wall against the spread of Salafi influence and build new local leaders.

According to Westerners who dealt with him, al Ahmad believed that reconciliation was a military tool best applied on besieged or partially besieged areas. Once an area was selected and the forces embedded there complied, the government could open trade and allow for goods to flow in. According to al Ahmad’s thinking, it would also be able to deal with new leaders who rose to power during the war or with those who previously had connections with the state. These men would be empowered as stakeholders assisting in securing peace and services. This would force people to choose between those who offered them money to fight or those who offered them money and services to gradually transition into a civilian role with less risk of death.

“Al Ahmad once told me,” said one UN official, that “history teaches us that leaders are made of those who offer their people something and power is the most important tool for revolutionary change in history.” Al Ahmad saw in the war an opportunity to reform Syria, though he was confronted by a system that resisted change. Even in 2012 when the threat against the Syrian state was increasing, he insisted that the government should still enact bold reforms. “Khaled believed that all wars were alike and only those who studied past experiences and applied it could gain the upper hand,” an EU official told me. So al Ahmad studied American counterinsurgency experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan during the George Bush and Obama eras.

Al Ahmad may not have convinced the West to embrace the Syrian government, but he persuaded key officials not to invest in more war. According to one Western critic, “Al Ahmad’s meetings with Westerners and the opposition were just a good show, and he used the reconciliations as an excuse for the West to feel less guilty about abandoning the Syrian revolution. He played on our guilt.”

Another Western critic, a UN expert on Syria with knowledge of areas that had undergone reconciliation processes, was unsatisfied with the outcome of Al Ahmad’s efforts. “The assessment I’ve been hearing from security minds in Syria is that there has been a striking calm in areas that have been reconciled, people are like the Walking Dead, but the trauma isn’t about the shelling,” the UN expert said. “The entire civil society has been blocked, it’s just going to explode. The outcome of the war, the end of the conflict, unless there is a genuine reconciliation, it’s just going to explode eventually. It can collapse any second.”

But for now, the peace has held, allowing communities to return to a semblance of normality, and for economies and social structures to begin functioning again. The eerie calm taking hold in areas that had once been theaters of carnage is the legacy of one of the Syrian war’s most mysterious figures.

Obscure origins

It remains unclear how al Ahmad rose from relative obscurity to become the devil’s advocate. I was told by multiple sources that his ascent was a symptom of Assad’s frustration with the inefficiency of his own system and with the dishonesty of his own advisors. The Syrian leader began to circumvent the official chain of command and appoint

informal advisors who reported directly to him. While it was unusual for Assad to select a 30-year-old man who was not part of the security apparatus to be his secret representative abroad, it appears that al Ahmad was elevated into the system by an influential father. There is much confusion about his sect, but his name and the fact that he is described as originally from Homs suggest he is a Sunni Muslim, which surely helped him build bridges with the opposition. While he does not seem to respect the system or regime itself, according to those who have spoken to him, he is staunchly loyal to the president as an individual and as the only man who can guarantee the stability of the Syrian state and Syria’s triumph over the crisis.

Said to have studied aeronautical engineering, al Ahmad is also believed to refer to the de-escalation process as a “soft landing” for Syria. Thus in meetings with Western officials, including Americans, when they would inevitably bring up the fate of Assad, al Ahmad is said to have dismissed the issue out of hand. The ship of state could weather a harsh storm, but under no circumstance would he allow it to crash against the hard rocks of regime change.

Another reason for al Ahmad’s emergence appears to be that he is simply the only man available for the job. Syria’s diplomats and intelligence officials lack the flexibility and finesse to talk to Westerners without sounding like ossified Baathist ideologues. Here too Assad demonstrated a clever approach. Knowing that his traditional representatives would alienate their interlocutors, he needed someone who could speak for him and cast him in a favorable light. Al Ahmad, say those who know him, is an avid consumer of books and articles in English and Arabic. While he is loosely associated with the Syrian nationalism of the SSNP, he has demonstrated a pragmatic approach shorn of ideological bonds. His sensibilities stand in strong contrast to Syrian government officials who have relied on local news that reinforces their worldview and hardens their outlook.

The withdrawal of international diplomats from Syria also meant that government officials only talked to a handful of emissaries from places like Algeria, China, Russia, North Korea and Cuba. One European diplomat compared al Ahmad to Ronaldo, the soccer striker who carries the otherwise unimpressive Portuguese national team on his back.

Al Ahmad appears not to be on a sanctions list, allowing him frequent travel to Europe, where he has met with officials in multiple governments. Members of the armed opposition have met him in different European cities including Berlin, Geneva and Oslo. On top of bringing Steve Simon and other Western officials to Syria, he’s brought opposition leaders to Damascus, both civilian and military.

Al Ahmad was frequently sought out by insurgents and opposition members seeking to make a deal with the government. He was also regularly invited to international conferences in Oslo, Moscow and elsewhere to explain the government point of view in logical and measured terms. He also provided special briefings for UN special envoys to Syria Ibrahim and De Mistura, as well as Jeffrey Feltman, the former State Department official who until recently headed the UN’s Department of Political Affairs.

Al Ahmad’s years of outreach and marketing on behalf of the government didn’t lead to radical change in the policies of the enemies of Damascus, but they prevented more radical policies from being adopted. Indeed, his efforts helped normalize the idea of de-escalation, reconciliation, local ceasefires, and decentralization as alternatives to endless war. In Western capitals divided in debates between Syria hawks and those who were more skeptical of regime change, al Ahmad offered the pragmatists crucial arguments to help prevent the pursuit of maximalist policies. His work was thus crucial in persuading an Obama administration that knew de-escalation was the only solution but couldn’t admit it for political reasons.

Likewise, when NGOs and humanitarian organizations needed advice, visas or a guide for working in Syria, al Ahmad often facilitated their work. And when when international media touched down in Damascus, he encouraged them to portray daily life in government-held areas and generate more balanced coverage. Many Western officials would deny meeting al Ahmad, even as they desperately sought him out. For them, he was a trusted guide to Damascus and a counter-weight to the rumor-mongering and propaganda spread by their Turkey-based colleagues, who had “gone native,” along with a cartoonishly biased Western media that has relied exclusively on a carefully cultivated network of opposition activists.

Life returns to normal

I caught a glimpse of the consequences of al Ahmad’s efforts last summer when I visited several areas in Syria that have reconciled with the government.

One of the most genuine reconciliations to take place was in Hammeh, a Sunni suburb of Damascus formerly under rebel control. Then there was Qudsaya, also an outlying area Damascus that had been controlled by the armed opposition. These suburban areas were the first to be fully normalized, meaning the siege was totally removed and a free flow of goods and people were allowed. They were also freed from unregulated militias and their weapons. In a deal organized by the then-head of the National Defense Forces in Damascus, Fadi Saqr, the opposition was given a choice to stay and receive an amnesty that guaranteed that none of the security agencies would arrest them. Their other option was to receive safe passage further north to opposition held areas, a practice pioneered in Homs in 2014.



The Damascus suburb of Hammeh

During Ramadan of 2017, a group of Syrian youths from Hammeh went to the orphanage of the neighboring poor Alawite suburb, Jebel Wurud, to deliver presents to the children, many of whose parents were killed during the fighting. The residents of Jebel Wurud, who up until a few months earlier had been enforcing a government-imposed siege on Hammeh, were astonished. The next day the young people in Hammeh held a children’s **festival** on a patch of land in the valley between the two mountain villages that had been a no man’s land during the fighting. As people from Jebel Wurud passed by the area to buy bread at a nearby government-run bakery, they and their children, though somewhat cautious and suspicious at first, eventually joined the fun. Inspired by the kind gesture from Hammeh’s youth, a group of young people from Jebel Wurud visited Hammeh the day after the festival, bearing gifts for Hammeh’s orphans.

“We focused on the families who suffered from this crisis from both areas,” explained Ebrahim Fatouh, a Hammeh local who helped lead the activity. “We got them together, especially the mothers who lost their children.”

Ebrahim, a 23-year-old freelance graphic designer born and raised in Hammeh, is public relations manager of Temkeen, which means empowerment in Arabic. Temkeen is a civil society group established by Ebrahim and his friends back in 2016 to help repair Hammeh’s social fabric. But it wasn’t until after the fighting ended that Temkeen was able to do anything truly effective.

“From 2012 to 2017, until the reconciliation, these villages were fighting,” said Ebrahim. The truce had allowed the necessary space for him and his friends to get to work. Hammeh is but one example.

Hammeh is an extension of Qudsaya, an even larger Damascus suburb that reconciled with the government as part of the Hammeh negotiations last year. In early 2017, residents of Hammeh kicked out the armed groups inhabiting the town and reconciled with the government after lengthy and arduous negotiations.

Hammeh and Qudsaya were held initially by the FSA — in Hammeh the rebel forces included some fighters affiliated with Syria’s Al Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al Nusra. During ceasefires in Qudsaya, fighters from Hammeh would often spoil the truce by launching attacks on government areas. This infuriated the government and the residents of Qudsaya and Hammeh. Ultimately the siege tactics imposed by the government on these areas worked. Nobody was forced to leave, they were given the choice of either remaining in the Syria of President Assad or leaving to insurgent-held areas in the north.

An estimated 300 insurgents, some 30 percent of the rebel fighters in Hammeh, as well as some of the civilian elements of the insurgency political administration, chose to stay and receive amnesty from the Syrian government in exchange for handing over their weapons. For those who stayed, checkpoints were removed and life was normalized, including for the men who were given amnesties.

Residents in Hammeh say that those given amnesty were able to return to their ordinary lives and now they come and go as they please. While they are looked upon with suspicion by some locals, there haven’t been any problems except for one verbal skirmish during Ramadan. The government got involved and mediated and those involved promised it

wouldn’t happen again.

Compared to other areas that came under opposition control, Hammeh endured little physical damage. On the way into Hammeh, I drove by what used to be the Barada beer factory. It was in ruins, destroyed by Al Nusra, which deems alcohol to be anti-Islamic. All that remained were mounds of broken green beer bottles. There were some damaged residential buildings strategically located at the top of the mountain that overlooks Hammeh, which insurgents had captured in an effort to control the entire town. Bullet holes from sniper fire could be spotted on the exterior of some homes and shops. But for the most part the town was still in good shape. And reconstruction on the damaged buildings had already begun when I was visiting.

Hammeh had been reintegrated into the city suburbs, so people and commerce flowed freely. There was a checkpoint at the entrance to the town to check for weapons and car bombs, but it was relaxed and easy to move back and forth. The men in charge of the checkpoints were locals from Hammeh who were hand selected by the local reconciliation committee, demonstrating some of the local autonomy that exists in Hammeh due to compromises by the government.

“The problem wasn’t the protests, it was sectarianism”

The important thing about Hammeh is how organic the reconciliation process was, with locals working hard to repair the area’s social fabric through local initiatives spearheaded by young people in Hammeh, such as the children’s festival organized between Hammeh and Jebel Wurud.

The first thing Temkeen did after the reconciliation went into effect was purchase a building in Hammeh, which they turned into a non-profit educational institution called Steps Education Center to help fill the gaps in schooling for kids who couldn’t attend classes during the fighting as well as job training for adults in software development, programing, website development, IT, electrical engineering and cooking. They also hope to use these educational initiatives to undo the damage from Islamist ideology spread by the armed groups.



Founders of TEMKEEN in Hammeh, from left to right: Ebrahim Fatouh, Bakri Abdulfatah, Mohaned Abdulfatah, Ahmad.

What was most striking during my visit to Hammeh was the ratio of schools to mosques. I lost count of the number of mosques after I reached six. I asked Ebrahim how many schools were in Hammeh. He said five, but that includes just one high school. This was a noticeable pattern in areas of Syria that fell to the opposition—the mosques seemed to exceed the number of schools.

After 2000, when Bashar al Assad took over the presidency following his father’s death, he relaxed some of the country’s anti-religious laws and thousands of new mosques were built. A senior official with the ministry of public record estimated that 10,000 mosques were built under Bashar. This number does not include the Koran memorization schools the government sponsored during this time. Many of these mosques were funded by private donors from outside the country, mostly from Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Ebrahim and his friends explained to me the role of the mosques in the protests that erupted in their town and later the role of foreigners.

When the uprising began, boys would pour out of the mosques after Friday prayers to protest after being riled up by their local sheikhs, said Ebrahim.

“There were never any problems in Hammeh that I can remember until 2011,” he said, explaining how the conflict in Hammeh evolved. “When the protests started here, a lot of young men went out and protested. They usually went after Friday prayer, the imams encouraged it. The problem wasn’t the protests, it was sectarianism. Hammeh is Sunni. There are neighborhoods around it that are Alawite and Shia.”

Ebrahim continued, “In 2011 it was just harmless protests. But in 2012 it became sectarian. Within 10 days heavy weapons were coming in. In 2012, we also found foreigners here, they started fighting the Syrian army. There was a Jordanian man living in Hammeh. He fought in Iraq, then came to Syria and settled here. The Jordanian man played a role in arming the protests. Then there was the first agreement in beginning of 2013 for a truce and it lasted two years. We all left during this time, living outside Hammeh. We didn’t try coming back because it was too dangerous.”

Ebrahim fled to Lebanon, got married and then returned to Hammeh in 2015. But the situation deteriorated again. This time he stayed and joined his friends in efforts to assist his community. He spoke out against sectarianism and volunteered with charities that delivered humanitarian aid.

His activism angered the Baraa Bin Malek brigade, one of the Islamist insurgent groups based in Hammeh. Ebrahim had posted a plea on Facebook to stop the violence and accept different religions, “so this brigade threatened me, they said I know your father, where you work.”

Ebrahim was forced to flee to his grandfather’s house outside of Hammeh but soon grew tired of hiding out. “After a month, I thought I have to come back because we have to stop this ideology from spreading. I thought maybe I can change someone’s mind if I talk to them.”

But the conditions on the ground made his work impossible.

“There were two brigades active in Hammeh throughout the conflict. In the last six months, before the reconciliation, they split into forty brigades because of infighting,” he recalled. “Each one had its own particular ideology and each one thought the other wasn’t religious enough.”

The rebel groups detained Ebrahim at the beginning of 2016 and interrogated him. “They accused me of dealing drugs and spreading an unacceptable ideology and being a kafir (infidel). I used to have long hair; they made me cut it. I stopped leaving the house and stopped all activities out of fear. My only contact was with my family,” he said.

“When they started the negotiations for reconciliation there was a military operation in Hammeh,” Ebrahim continued. “That’s when I was happy, people started to understand and say we don’t want this terrorist group here. The reason this agreement works here is because people started to protest against the rebel groups. They demanded the rebel groups leave. It was the same in Qudsaya. The armed groups realized the people don’t support them here, that’s why they said yes to the agreement. They left. After that we were safe, there’s no rebels anymore. At that time, we became active again and have been trying to convince everyone to accept other people, to be inclusive. We started out just four of us. Now there are 40 people in our organization.”

In 2010, the population of Hammeh, per the census, was 25,000. The population now is believed to be even higher given the number of people who have returned in addition to the internally displaced who have moved to Hammeh.



Life in Hammeh returns to normal following reconciliation deal.

In 2016, the main street of Hammeh was empty. Today it is bustling with cars and families pouring in and out of local shops. Four of the stores on this street are owned by women. The boys point out that when the armed groups were in charge you couldn’t find a single woman running anything. In fact, women were rarely even seen in public. Nearby, the sound of children frolicking around a newly reopened public swimming pool filled the air. Not long ago, the pool served as a base for a band of insurgents.

[Nir Rosen’s influential 2014 paper on Syrian conflict de-escalation](#) by [Max Blumenthal](#) on Scribd

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September 2014,
by Nir Rosen

De-escalating the Conflict in Syria and Containing IS

The following paper represents the views of this analyst alone and is not the official position of his Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). It is written in response to numerous questions this analyst confronted while in Washington DC. It is longer than most people might want to read, but this is a little understood conflict made even more confusing by a distorted public debate.

This is a paper about hope in the war on terror. This may seem strange given the trajectory Syria and the region are in. All evidence suggests increasing violence and most observers are bereft of solutions. It is clear that the Syrian regime is staying, the Islamic State is staying (in fact that is its unofficial motto), Jabhat al Nusra is staying, the Syrian insurgency is staying, Shiite militias are staying. In fact it seems only the Syrian people are leaving. And yet there is a path that leads back out of this hell. It requires first (as all sound policy does) the embrace of a reality based analysis as a prerequisite and the recognition that time has run out for what President Obama has aptly termed fantasies. It is a warning against a purely visceral and knee-jerk response to the terror threat from the region and a call for the inclusion of a strong strategic political approach lest the results of the war on the Islamic State and Jabhat al Nusra be their empowerment.

Syria’s civil war is now three and a half years old and it continues to metastasize, affecting more of the Middle East and Muslim world with no end in sight. Despite wildly ambitious predictions since 2011, it is clear the regime is not going to fall and President Bashar al Assad is not going to leave. It is equally clear that Syrian security forces will not be able to regain territory they have lost to diverse insurgent and extremist groups. While the international threat resulting from this crisis grows, the civil war also continues to destroy the lives and futures of generations of Syrians. The NGO is working on solutions that will end the war in as much of Syria as possible. Extinguishing the fires is

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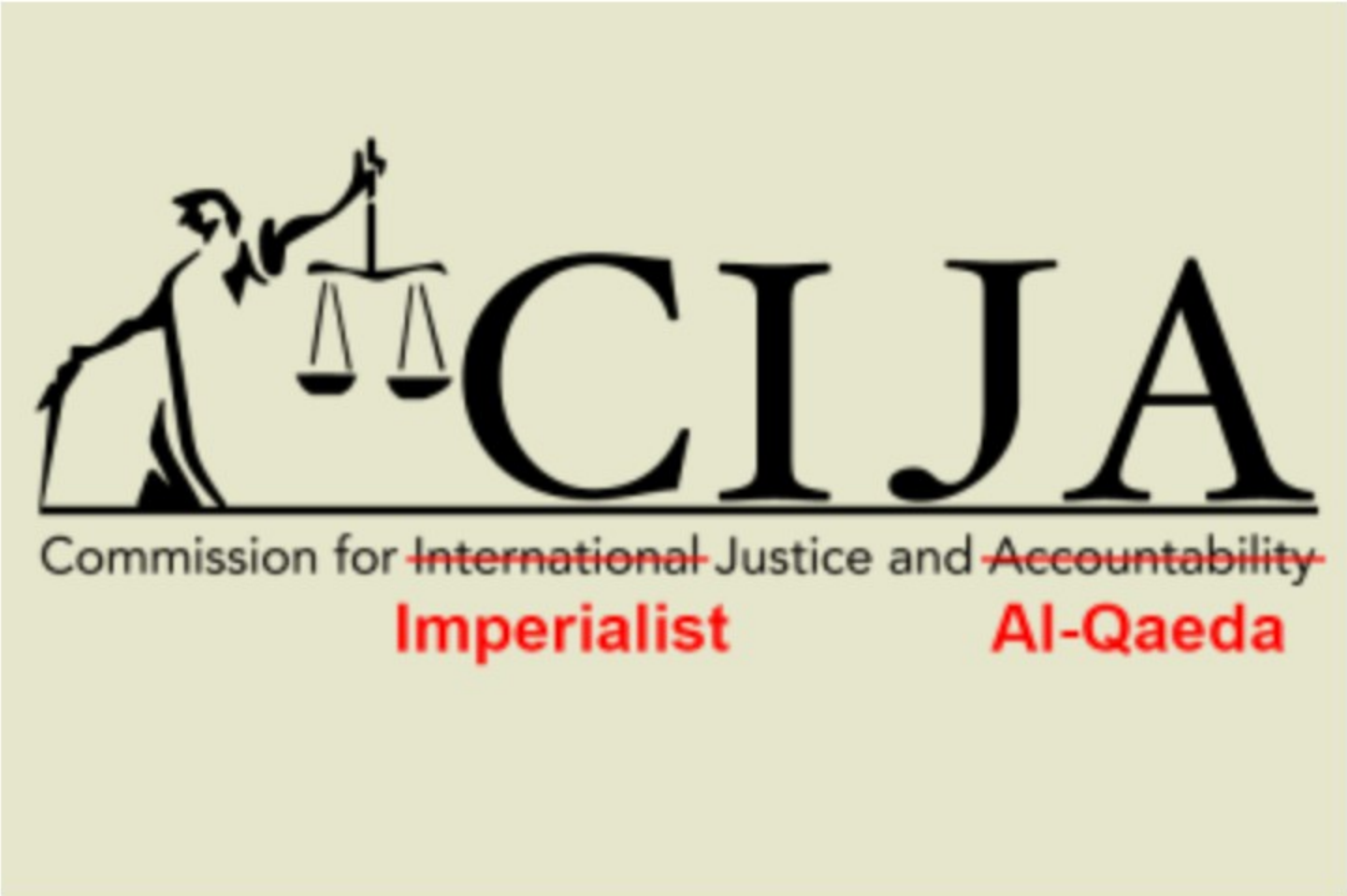


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