

Presidential Election and Changing Situation in Syria^{*}

Wang Suolao[†]

On June 3, 2014, the Syrian government held a new presidential election amid doubts of the international community. On June 4, Mohammad al-Laham, Speaker of the People's Council of Syria (the parliament), announced the electoral result: 11.634 million voters, out of 15.846 million eligible Syrian voters, voted and the turnout was 73.42%. Among three presidential candidates, the incumbent president Bashar al-Assad won 10.32 million votes, 88.7% of the total. The other two candidates, Hassan al-Nouri and Maher Hajjar, received 4.3% and 3.2% of the votes, respectively.¹ Assad successfully secured his presidential post by a landslide win. But why did the Syrian government insist on holding the election in the midst of the civil war and in the face of objections from the UN and major Western countries? How would Assad's reelection affect the Geneva Communiqué, which is aimed at politically solving the Syrian crisis by the international community? What would be the impact of Assad's victory on the long-lasting Syrian Civil War?

SOLIDIFYING THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ASSAD REGIME

Bashar al-Assad is the second son of the former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (1930-2000). Hafez al-Assad had been

^{*} This article is originally written in Chinese and translated by Zhao Hanyu.

[†] Associate professor, director of the Middle East Research Center, School of International Studies, Peking University.

the president for 29 years until his passing away on June 10, 2000. According to Article 83 of the 1973 Constitution of Syria, the age threshold of a presidential candidate was 40, while Bashar, born on September 11, 1965, was then about 35 years old. The People's Council of Syria held meetings after Hafez's death and revised the article to lower the age threshold of presidential candidates to 34, which made Bashar a qualified candidate. On July 10, 2000, a referendum was held in Syria on whether Bashar should be the president or not, and he won with 97.29% of the votes. Bashar swore in on July 17, 2000 and his term of office would be seven years. He was reelected on May 27, 2007 in yet another national referendum and won 11.2 million votes, or 97.62% of the total (with a turnout of 95.86%).²

Now, 14 years have elapsed and the then Assad junior is nearly in his fifties. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis on March 2011, President Assad has been struggling to maintain the rule of Ba'ath Party, fighting against rebel forces both at home and abroad and also struggling against the United States, EU and other Western powers as well as regional players such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. On April 21, 2014, when al-Laham, speaker of the People's Council, in a surprise announcement that the Syrian presidential election would be held on June 3, Stéphane Dujarric, the spokesperson of the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, cautioned Syria and expressed opposition to this unilateral decision by arguing that holding elections in the current circumstances "will damage the political process and hamper the prospects for political solution that the country so urgently needs" and "such elections are incompatible with the letter and spirit of the Geneva Communiqué."³ Foreign ministers of the "London 11," including the US, the UK, France, Germany and Italy, met in London on May 5, 2014 and issued a communiqué to "denounce the Assad regime's unilateral plan to hold illegitimate presidential elections on June 3," claiming the election "utterly contradicts the Geneva Communiqué and is a parody of democracy."⁴ I would argue that **the major reason for the Syrian government, under all kinds of pressure, to hold the presidential election amidst the urgency of**

The major reason for the Syrian government, under all kinds of pressure, to hold the presidential election amidst the urgency of civil war was to solidify the foundation of Assad regime's legitimacy and to maintain the ruling power of Ba'ath Party.

civil war was to solidify the foundation of Assad regime's legitimacy and to maintain the ruling power of Ba'ath Party.

Since the outbreak of the crisis three years ago, the Syrian government, under great internal and external pressure, has been forced to launch various political reforms. On October 15, 2011, Assad promulgated the 33th Presidential Decree to establish a constitutional revision committee, which was commissioned to fix the problems in the 1973 Constitution. When the constitution was revised on February 15, 2012, Assad decided to hold a nationwide referendum on the new Constitution on February 26, 2012, by issuing the 85th Presidential Decree. Consequently, 57.4% of Syrian voters (with a turnout of 8.37 million people)

in the referendum, or 89.4% of all participating, approved the 2012 Constitution.⁵ According to the new Constitution, Syria would adopt a multi-party system, and the mandatory provision on the dominant position of Ba'ath Party, which was seen in the old Constitution, was abolished; and the president would serve no more than two terms, i.e., 14 years.

Elections for the People's Council of Syria were held on May 7, 2012. According to the principle for establishing a multi-party system embodied in the new Constitution, other political parties were allowed to compete with the ruling Ba'ath Party. Assad intended to use this to demonstrate his sincerity on political reform to the international community. Yet, the major opposition parties in Syria chose to boycott this election, and thus the "National Unity Alliance" led by Ba'ath Party won 183 seats, accounting for 73.2% of the total 250. In total, 5.2 million people turned out to vote and the turnout was 51.26%.⁶ Though Western countries in general refused to recognize the results, the elections were nevertheless

crucial for the Syrian government as they provided the Ba'ath Party with legitimacy to continue to rule.

July 17, 2014 would be the last day of Assad's second presidential term, and according to the limit set in the 2012 Constitution on the consecutive terms of the president, Assad, having taken the presidential post for 14 years, would not be legitimate to run for the office again. Yet, in consideration that the start of Assad's second term prior to the birth of the new Constitution, the Syrian government regarded the constitutional provision was not applicable to Assad. Therefore, without a new presidential election, Assad's presidency would lose its legitimacy automatically after July 17, 2014. In order to make his presidency legitimate, Assad needed not only to participate again in a presidential election but also to be sure to win. Only by doing this can he "legally" guarantee the continued governance of the Ba'ath Party and the Assad family?

With unfolding of the second Geneva Conference and subsequent peaceful in January 22-31, 2014, the Syrian government, to avoid being blamed for undermining the political settlement of the Syrian crisis, decided not to hold the presidential election earlier. Nevertheless, the changes of the international and Middle East situation eventually drove the Syrian authorities to take the decision. The first change was the deterioration of the relations between Russia and Ukraine as of February 2014, and the second was the March 30 announcement by the Egyptian government to hold a presidential election in May 26-27, 2014.⁷

The Syrian government has an especially close relationship with Russia. Without the firm support from Moscow, the Assad regime could hardly maintain its rule. After the outbreak of Crimean crisis on February 2014, Vladimir Putin reclaimed the Russian sovereignty over Crimea, regardless of warnings from the US and Europe, which has undermined Russia's relationship with the West severely. Moscow also faced the joint sanctions from the United States and Europe. As for Syria, however, the tension between Russia and the West was good news. Syria firmly stood with the Russians during the Crimean crisis. On March 6, Assad called Putin to "express Syria's solidarity with Russian efforts to restore security and stability to Ukraine."⁸ On March 27, the UN General

Assembly voted for the resolution denouncing the referendum in Crimea as illegitimate. Of the 193 member states, 163 voted, and a resolution was passed, with 100 “yes”, 11 “no” and 58 abstentions. The 11 countries voting “no” to the resolution included Russia and Syria.⁹

Syrian government was greatly encouraged by Moscow’s tough stance. In other words, Syria’s decision to hold a presidential election in spite of Western opposition is also a show of “toughness”, following Russia’s precedent. In return, Russia affirmed its support to Syria’s election. Dmitriy Rogozin, Russian vice prime minister, visited Syria and held a talk with Assad on May 25. He publically claimed, “Syrian presidential election is legitimate, for it will be held at statutory time in accordance with the Syrian Constitution...”¹⁰ In addition, Russia, Iran and some other countries sent observers to monitor the election on June 3. On June 5, Alexander Lukashovich, spokesman of Russian Foreign Ministry, stated that “the elections were held in a fair, free and transparent atmosphere,” and “we have no grounds to put into question the legitimacy of the elections.”¹¹ Since Russia has been isolated due to Western sanctions, it is possible that the Kremlin is using the Syrian presidential election to distract attention and thus mitigate external pressure on itself.

Though the Egyptian presidential election was not at all directly related to Syria, Damascus sensed optimism from it. Egyptian politics underwent turmoil after the ousting of former President Mubarak during the “January 25 revolution” in 2011. Mohamed Morsi, a senior member of Muslim Brotherhood, became the Egyptian president on June 2012 but was overthrown only one year later in a military coup led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the then Egyptian defense minister, on July 3, 2013. The coup d’état was extensively tolerated and acclaimed by ordinary Egyptians. Al-Sisi was viewed as a strongman who could maintain stability and economic development in Egypt, while the Muslim Brotherhood was denounced as a terrorist organization by the Egyptian government on December 2013. It is well known that the Assad family also rose from the military, and the Assad senior became the president after serving as Syrian defense minister as well. In 1982, Hafez al-Assad brutally suppressed the rebellion of the Syrian

Muslim Brotherhood. After the Syrian Crisis began in 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood, along with other opposition forces, rose against the Assad regime. Therefore, the similarity between al-Sisi and Assad is quite obvious, since both are enemies of the Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt and Syria, respectively. Three weeks after the announcement of the date of Egyptian presidential election, Damascus eventually decided the date for its own presidential elections. Al-Sisi won a landslide victory by netting 96.91% of the votes.¹² Similarly, Bashar al-Assad was reelected by netting 88.7% of the votes.

INCREASING DIFFICULTY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF THE GENEVA COMMUNIQUÉ

The Geneva Communiqué, officially known as the Final Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria, is the final one issued by the Action Group for Syria at the Geneva conference on June 30, 2012. Members of the Action Group for Syria include the UN secretary-general, secretary-general of the League of Arab States, foreign ministers of China, France, Russia, Britain and the United States (five permanent members of the UN Security Council), foreign ministers of Turkey, Iraq (chair of the Summit of the League of Arab States), Kuwait (chair of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the League of Arab States) and Qatar (chair of the Arab Follow-up Committee on Syria of the League of Arab States), and the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, etc. The Geneva conference was chaired by the former UN Secretary General Kofy Annan, the joint special representative of the United Nations and League of Arab States.

According to the final communiqué, the goal of all the parties at the Geneva conference was for a political solution to the Syrian crisis. The parties agreed to secure full implementation of the six-point plan and UN Security Council Resolutions 2042 and 2043; to facilitate and support a Syrian-led transition; and to build an inclusive transitional governing body that “include members of the present government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.” The communiqué

states, “It is for the Syrian people to determine the future of the country. All groups and segments of society in Syria must be enabled to participate in a National Dialogue process. That process must not only be inclusive, it must also be meaningful...”¹³ The Geneva Communiqué is an agreement among global major powers and regional actors, which reflects international efforts to solve the Syrian crisis politically. However, since representatives from both the Syrian government and the opposition were excluded from the conference, it would be difficult for both parties in the civil war to accept and implement the communiqué.

On July 7, 2012, in an interview with the French newspaper *Libération*, Kofi Annan admitted for the first time that “the UN’s effort to solve the Syrian crisis failed.”¹⁴ On September 1, Lakhdar Brahimi, former Algerian foreign minister, replaced Annan as the joint representative of the United Nations and Arab League to Syria. The main task of Brahimi remains to persuade the Syrian government and the opposition to go back to the negotiation table and discuss specific steps to implement the Geneva Communiqué. Despite painstaking efforts made by the UN, the United States and Russia, etc., the Geneva II Conference on Syria was held in January 22-31, 2014, and about 40 countries sent representatives. However, the first round of negotiations ended in failure as did the second round during February 10-15. Right before the third round of negotiations, Syrian government decided to hold the presidential election on June 3. Assad’s reelection would render it more difficult to implement the communiqué and to build an inclusive transitional governing body, for the following reasons:

First, the unilateral decision of the Syrian government to hold presidential elections meant Assad was reluctant to share power with the opposition, which is tantamount to a denial of and refusal to the intention of the Geneva Communiqué. According to Article 30 of the Syrian General Electoral Law, approved by the Parliament on March 2014, presidential candidates not only should be Syrian nationals at birth, but also must meet the requirement that his or her parents have Syrian nationality at their birth, and have resided in Syria continuously for more than ten years when applying for consideration as a presidential candidate.¹⁵ These two preconditions

excluded many opposition leaders who had lived overseas for many years, thus putting a stop to the possibility for opposition candidates to become the national leader of Syria. In the wake of the announcement of Syrian presidential election, Brahimi resigned as the joint special representative on May 13, 2014.¹⁶ His resignation, along with his predecessor's choice, demonstrated the difficulty of implementing the communiqué.

Second, the Syrian opposition has all along opposed the rule of President Assad and refused to accept the Geneva Communiqué. The opposition groups in Syria are basically factional, lack solidarity and coherent positions. From November 8 to 11, 2012, representatives of several opposition groups met at Qatar and decided to establish the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (commonly known as the Syrian National Coalition). The National Coalition, as a unified opposition organization, previously declined to attend the incoming Geneva II Conference and refused to cooperate with the Syrian government to facilitate the country's political transition. On October 22, 2013, the Friends of Syria Core Group of Countries met in London, and foreign ministers from 11 countries, namely, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, UK, US, France, Italy and Germany, known as London 11, attended the meeting. Ahmad Asi al-Jarba, the chairman of the National Coalition, was also invited. The London 11 Final Communiqué was issued. According to the document, the group members agreed that "we would put our united and collective weight behind the UN-led Geneva II process," and decided that "Assad will play no role in that future government of Syria."¹⁷ In fact, the Geneva Communiqué avoids mentioning the role of Assad in the future transitional governing body deliberately, since the Syrian government would reject any transition plan excluding Assad. However, the London 11 Final Communiqué regards shutting Assad out of the Geneva peace talks as a precondition, which obviously violates the original purpose of the Geneva Communiqué and thereby incited strong protests from the Syrian government. Hence, it is not difficult to understand that why the Geneva II Conference on Syria ended in vain.

Third, while refusing to admitting President Assad as the legitimate leader of Syria, the US and EU regarded the National Coalition as the “legitimate” representative of the Syrian people, which was tantamount to negate the aim of the Geneva Communiqué. On August 18, 2011, President Obama officially stated, “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”¹⁸ Since that time, the legitimacy of President Assad had been written off by the US government. On the same day, Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policies, also announced, “The EU notes the complete loss of Bashar al-Assad’s legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian people and the necessity for him to step aside.”¹⁹ Meanwhile, Western countries recognized the legitimacy of the National Coalition, the representative of Syrian opposition groups. On December 12, 2012, William J. Burns, the US Deputy Secretary of State, claimed at the 4th Ministerial Meeting of the Friends of the Syrian People in Morocco, “The United States recognized the coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in December 2012.”²⁰ During May 7-14, 2014, Ahmad al-Jarba, President of the Coalition, was invited to visit the US and met John Kerry (secretary of state), Susan Rice (National Security Advisor) and other US officials. The US intended to strengthen its ties with the Syrian opposition by recognizing the Coalition’s representative office in the United States as a foreign mission.²¹ On June 3, when Assad was reelected, William Hague, the representative of London 11 and British Foreign Secretary, responded, “Assad lacked legitimacy before this election, and he lacks it afterwards. This election bore no relation to genuine democracy.” Besides, he pointed out, “Holding an election in such circumstances is just a way of sustaining his dictatorship.”²²

The Geneva Communiqué was a product of coordination and compromise of various parties two years ago. In the past two years, great changes took place in Syrian domestic situations, the Middle East and major power relations as well. In other words, **the Geneva Communiqué could be hardly adaptable to the current circumstances of the Syrian crisis. Though it is too earlier to judge the final death of the Communiqué, it is undeniable that**

efforts made by the international community failed completely. Even if the next joint special representative tries to push for the Geneva peace talks, London 11 probably will add new conditions and barriers.

FROM CIVIL WAR TO WAR ON
TERROR?

On July 29, 2011, a group of mutinous military officials announced the formation of Free Syrian Army, determined to overthrow the Assad regime by force. Since then, the Syrian crisis escalated to a civil war, which has caused thousands of casualties and the displacement of large numbers of civilians. According to the report of the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, more than 100,000 Syrian civilians were killed, 6.5 million were internally displaced and 9.3 million lived on humanitarian aid in the three-year civil war, which started from the outbreak of Syrian crisis from March 15, 2011 to January 2014. Moreover, 2.3 million people — half of them children — were forced to flee to neighboring countries.²³ **Viewing the causes of the humanitarian crisis of Syrian civil war, we find that threat from domestic and international terrorism is one of the critical factors.** Among various opposition armed forces in Syria, there are not only domestic secular moderates such as Free Syrian Army, but also global terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Al-Nusra Front, etc.

To begin with, al-Qaeda and its branches have largely infiltrated into the Syrian

The Geneva Communiqué could be hardly adaptable to the current circumstances of the Syrian crisis. Though it is too earlier to judge the final death of the Communiqué, it is undeniable that efforts made by the international community failed completely.

Viewing the causes of the humanitarian crisis of Syrian civil war, we find that threat from domestic and international terrorism is one of the critical factors.

battlefield and become the most bloody, cruel force in the war. According to the latest report released by Israeli Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, the number of foreign anti-government combatants in Syria is about 7,000 to 8,000, most of whom belong to terrorist groups, such as ISIL/ISIS and Al-Nusra Front that are related to al Qaeda. Among them, more than 5,000 come from Sunni Arab countries in the Middle East; about 1,600 to 2,100 are from Western countries, and the rest 600 to 700 people come from Asian Muslim countries and regions, including 100 East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) members from Xinjiang, China.²⁴

Al-Nusra Front, an abbreviation for “The Support Front for the People of Al-Sham”, was founded on January 24, 2012 and its leader is Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani. On April 2013, Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, who announced Al-Nusra Front to be an extension of al-Qaeda in Syria.²⁵ The Al-Nusra Front vowed to overthrow the Assad government through jihad and to create a real Islamic state in Syria ruled by Sharia. Members of Al-Nusra Front are mostly Syrian Sunnis and some international jihadists. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), grew out of “Islamic State of Iraq” that was created after the American 2003 invasion of Iraq. This organization, long affiliated to al-Qaeda, fought against Iraqi military and the US forces in Iraq and conducted a series of terrorist attacks targeted at civilians. With the unfolding of Syrian crisis, ISIS infiltrated into Syria and expanded rapidly by recruiting locals. On April 9, 2013, its leader Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi announced that the Islamic State of Iraq was merging with the Al-Nusra Front to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) with the goal of subverting existing regimes in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan by jihad, and to create a united Islamic state in the region. However, al-Jawlani, the leader of Al-Nusra Front, rejected the proposal for the merge of two forces the next day.²⁶

The Al-Nusra Front’s rejection mainly stemmed from its disagreement with ISIS’s recklessness in its attempt to establish a Caliphate. Factors that gave the Al-Nusra Front pause are: (1) ISIS

expanded their slaughter of heathens and dissidents; (2) ISIS killed civilians indiscriminately in the war since many thuggish foreign jihadists are its soldiers; (3) ISIS forced other groups to swear allegiance, otherwise they would be charged with betraying Allah; (4) ISIS opposed cooperation with other secular groups, such as Free Syrian Army, worrying that it would strengthen their rivals and make it more difficult to defeat them in the future; (5) ISIS forced people in the occupied areas to hand in supplies and food, and pay taxes to support their jihad cause.²⁷ The Al-Nusra Front asked al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to arbitrate its dispute with ISIS. Zawahiri, opposing ISIS's over-expansion into Syria as well, demanded it to follow the order of al-Qaeda; otherwise it would be kicked out. On May 12, 2014, the spokesman of ISIS announced that ISIS was no longer an extension of al-Qaeda,²⁸ which indicated that it eventually separated from al-Qaeda and became an independent organization.

Although the Al-Nusra Front, compared with ISIS, acted with more restraint, its affiliation with al-Qaeda implies that its principles and courses are not fundamentally different from those of ISIS. On March 7, 2014, Saudi King Abdullah issued the No.44 King's Order in 2014 to put ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and Muslim Brotherhood on the terrorist list.²⁹ The US Department of State also announced on May 14 that ISIS and Al-Nusra Front were the two major terrorist groups in Syria.³⁰

Furthermore, for a fear of rapid growth of global terrorism in Syria, the US and other Western countries refused to militarily intervene in Syria or to provide any high-quality weapons to the moderates of Syrian opposition. Since the beginning of Syrian crisis, despite its denial of the legitimacy of the Assad regime, the Obama administration has disapproved of military intervention into Syria despite great domestic and international pressure. On August 20, 2012, Obama said in a NBC interview, "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation."³¹ This was the first time that President Obama draws a "red line" for the military intervention

in Syria. On August 21, 2013, a chemical attack occurred in the suburbs of Damascus and around 1,000 people were killed. The US intelligence released an investigation report on August 30, branding the Syrian government to be responsible for the attack. The red line drawn by President Obama a year ago seemed to be crossed, and the condition to launch military intervention was met. On August 31, President Obama stated, “Now, after careful deliberation, I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets. This would not be an open-ended intervention. We would not put boots on the ground.”³²

However, less than one week later, President Obama gave up the idea of a military strike on Syria. On September 6, Obama, along with leaders of Australia, Canada, France, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom, made a joint statement at the G20 summit in Saint Petersburg, Russia, “Recognizing that Syria’s conflict has no military solution, we reaffirm our commitment to seek a peaceful political settlement through full implementation of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.”³³ Due to the commitment to seek a political settlement to the crisis plus Russian efforts to persuade the Syrian authorities to give up chemical weapons, John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov, Russian foreign minister, reached framework agreement on securing Syria’s chemical weapons on September 14 in Geneva. The agreement demanded that chemical weapons in Syria must be destroyed or removed by mid-2014. The Syrian government accepted not only the agreement, but also the UN Security Council Resolution 2118 which was aimed at destroying Syria’s chemical weapons. The unprecedented cooperation from the Syrian government undercut the legitimacy of any possible American military intervention and thus the military intervention ended up with nothing definite.

Since then, the US government has stopped mentioning a possible military strike on Syria; instead, a political settlement has become its primary policy alternative. The Syrian opposition felt quite disappointed. During May 7-4, 2014, the Ahmad al-Jarba, president of the National Coalition, paid a visit to Washington. During his visit, al-Jarba kept calling for American military intervention, or at least providing high-quality weapons for the rebels to fight against

the air forces of the Syrian military. He lobbied American think tanks that Free Syrian Army needed “effective weapons to deal with attacks, including air raids; they will help us change the balance of power in the battle”.³⁴ However, for John Kerry, attacking ISIS and al-Qaeda-related groups is more urgent than the regime change.³⁵ On May 12, meeting with Obama at the White House, al-Jarba guaranteed that the advanced weapons provided by the US would never fall into the hands of terrorists, but Obama still avoided talking about providing any military equipment.³⁶

Finally, the Syrian government has all along labeled its war against the rebels as a “war on terror,” the international community, however, never agreed with this definition. The savage aggression of ISIS lately in Iraq might help change the situation more or less. Early on July 2, 2012, President Assad signed and issued the National Anti-Terrorist Act, which rules that any civilian participating in terrorist activities will be punished.³⁷ On November 9, 2012, Assad said in a Russian television interview, “The Syrian conflict is not a civil war. No civil war took place in my country but battles against terrorists who receive external support and intend to disturb our social stability. This is the nature of our war.”³⁸ For Assad’s interpretation of the Syrian civil war, the international society generally regarded his rhetoric as a smokescreen and unconvincing.

Surprisingly, on June 10, 2014, ISIS successfully occupied Mosul, the second largest city and an important town in northern Iraq. The next day they took Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam Hussein, only 170 kilometers away from Bagdad. The wanton killing of innocent civilians conducted by ISIS eventually made the international community realize that international terrorist groups represented by ISIS are the real common threat to Syria, Iraq and even the United States. Hussein Haridy, former assistant to the Foreign Minister of Egypt, recently wrote, “The overall situation calls for a deep rethink on the part of Arab countries that have been financing and backing the Syrian opposition fighting the Assad government for the last three years, and that has failed disastrously in its attempts to overthrow the Syrian regime.... It is about time to change course radically in Syria.”³⁹

If Assad and his government can seize the chance to make the international society fully recognize the threat of Syrian terrorists and actively cooperate with the Iraqi and American government to fight against ISIS and other terrorist groups, Syrian government will win more sympathizers, and its “war on terror” rhetoric will gain more support from the outside world.

CONCLUSION

2014 is a rare year of fortune for the Syrian government. It took advantage of the international and regional changes to overcome the legitimacy crisis of the Assad regime, which greatly encouraged the supporters of Ba’ath Party. ISIS’s aggression in Iraq not only has revealed its evil nature and outraged Arab and Western countries, in addition to alleviating the tremendous pressure, imposed by Western powers and Gulf States, on the Syrian government. For the Assad regime, it was indeed a great relief.

However, Western countries could not stand by and wait to see the revival of Assad regime. Undoubtedly, they would spare no effort to prevent Assad from being reelected. On May 22, 2014, right before the Syrian presidential election, France took the lead in proposing a draft resolution, co-signed by other 63 member states, at the UN Security Council. The core of the resolution is deciding to “refer the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011 to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court”.⁴⁰ Following the case of Sudan President Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir, if the situation of Syria is referred to Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, President Assad may end up with being prosecuted, convicted and issued a warrant for arrest. Although President Assad may not be actually detained, the arrest warrant will cause a chain of unpredictable results.

Russia and China again jointly vetoed the draft, which was the fourth time Russia and China used their vetoes to block resolutions against the Assad regime. Regarding to the vetoes, the permanent representatives of the US and UK launched vitriolic attacks on Russia and China. Samantha Power, the American representative at UN, stated, “Today’s vetoes by Russia and China protect not

only Al-Assad and his henchmen but also the radical Islamic terrorists.... Such vetoes have aided impunity not just for Al-Assad but for terrorist groups, as well.”⁴¹ Mark Lyall Grant, the British representative, followed, “It is to Russia and China’s shame that they have chosen to block efforts to achieve justice for the Syrian people.”⁴² Responding to American and British accusations, Vitaly Churkin, the Russian representative stated, “If the United States and the United Kingdom were to together refer the Iraqi dossier to the ICC, the world would see that they are truly against impunity.”⁴³ And Wang Ming, Vice Chinese representative, replied, “Just now, the United States, the United Kingdom and other Western countries have made totally unfounded accusations against China. That is irresponsible and hypocritical. China firmly rejects the slander expressed by those Western countries against China.”⁴⁴

It is believed that aside from military intervention, Western countries and their Gulf allies will keep squashing the international space of Syrian government. The struggle over Syria among major powers may intensify. **However, the future of Syria will never fall into the hands of great powers. The fate of Syria must be determined by the Syrian people.** If the Assad government can fully leverage the patriotic mood evoked by the presidential election to unite Syrian people from different denominations especially the Sunnis, divide and marginalize extremists particularly international terrorists, and gain support from domestic moderates and reformists, it may eventually win the three-year “war on terror”. Conversely, if Assad, trapped in an outdated mindset, continually disappoints his people and silences dissent voices, he will possibly fail in the end, despite firm support from Moscow, Tehran and other international allies.

However, the future of Syria will never fall into the hands of great powers. The fate of Syria must be determined by the Syrian people.

- 1 “Dr. Bashar Hafez al-Assad wins post of President of Syria with sweeping majority of votes at 88.7%,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, June 5, 2014, available at: <http://sana.sy/eng/393/2014/06/05/548613.htm>, June 6, 2014.
- 2 “97.62% of the Syrian voters reelected Assad as the President,” London: *Asharq Al-Awsat (The Middle East)*, May 30, 2007.
- 3 “UN cautions Syria against holding presidential election amidst ongoing ‘tragedy,’” *The UN News Centre*, April 21, 2014, available at: http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47619&Kw1=Syria&Kw2=presidential+election&Kw3=Geneva#.U_r-R6NTAtE.
- 4 “‘London 11’ Friends of Syria Core Group Ministerial Communiqué,” May 15, 2014, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/london-11-friends-of-syria-core-group-ministerial-communication>, May 20, 2014.
- 5 “Syrian Government approved the Constitution after announcing the referendum results,” London: *Asharq Al-Awsat (The Middle East)*, February 28, 2012.
- 6 “SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC Majlis Al-Chaab (People’s Assembly),” See Inter-Parliamentary Union website: http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2307_E.htm, May 9, 2014.
- 7 “Egypt announces to hold presidential election on May 26,” *the People (in Chinese)*, March 31, 2014, available at: <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/0331/c1002-24776323.html>, June 13, 2014.
- 8 “President al-Assad expresses Syria’s solidarity with Russian efforts to restore security and stability to friendly Ukraine,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, March 6, 2014, available at: <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2014/03/06/531641.htm>, May 9, 2014.
- 9 Alexander Smith, “North Korea, Syria, Cuba Back Russia’s Crimea Incursion at UN,” *NBC news*, March 28, 2014, available at: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/north-korea-syria-cuba-back-russias-crimea-incursion-un-n65881>, May 10, 2014.
- 10 “**President al-Assad: Russia’s role important to protect stability in the world,**” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, May 25, 2014, available at: <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2014/05/25/546279.htm>, May 26, 2014.
- 11 “Russia: Opinion of millions of Syrians cannot be ignored,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, June 5, 2014, available at: <http://sana.sy/eng/22/2014/06/05/548758.htm>, June 6, 2014.
- 12 Gamal Essam El-Din, “Place of no Return,” *Al-Abram Weekly*, No.1200, June 5, 2014.
- 13 “Final communiqué of the Action Group for Syria- Geneva,” June 30, 2012, available at: <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>, May 10, 2014.
- 14 Chen Xiaoru, “The UN’s mediation fails and the Syria issue can only restore to force,” *The China Youth Daily*, July 9, 2012.
- 15 “Syrian General Electoral Law,” *Syrian Arab News Agency (in Arabic)*, April 21, 2014, available at: <http://sana.sy/ara/392/2014/04/21/540087.htm>, May 10, 2014.
- 16 Ban Ki-moon, “Announcement of Lakhdar Brahimi’s resignation as United Nations and Arab League Envoy to Syria,” *UN News Centre*, May 13, 2014, available at: http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments_full.asp?statID=2221#.U_7aRqN-678, May 20, 2014.
- 17 “‘London 11’ meeting on Syria,” *Government of the UK*, October 22, 2013, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/london-11-meeting-on-syria.zh>, May 20, 2014.
- 18 “Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria,” August 18, 2011, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria>, May 20, 2014.
- 19 “Declaration by the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, on behalf of the European Union on EU action following the escalation of violent repression in Syria,” August 18, 2011, available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/cfsp/124393.pdf, May 20, 2014.
- 20 “Press Availability at the 4th Ministerial of the Friends of the Syrian People Meeting,” December 12, 2012, available at: <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2012/201948.htm>, May 20, 2014.

Presidential Election and Changing Situation in Syria

21 "Daily Press Briefing," May 5, 2014, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/05/225613.htm>, May 20, 2014.

22 "Foreign Secretary Responds to Syrian Election Result," *Government of the UK*, June 5, 2014, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-responds-to-syrian-election-result.zh>, May 20, 2014.

23 Ban Ki-moon, "Remarks at opening of high-level segment of the Geneva Conference on Syria," Montreux (Switzerland), January 22, 2014, available at: http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/speeches/statments_full.asp?statID=2111#.U0odLfmSz0c, June 17, 2014.

24 Wang Shuiping, "Israel issues a report on 'foreign combatants in the Syrian Civil War'," *Guangming Daily* (in Chinese), June 18, 2014.

25 Hamzah Mustafa Mustafa, "Al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Split-up" (in Arabic), Doha: Arab Policy Research Center, November 2013, pp.10-11.

26 *Ibid.*, pp.19-20.

27 *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

28 "ISIS attacks Zawahiri, denying its relationship with al-Qaeda and stating its attitude towards Sisi and Morsi," CNN Arabic Website, May 12, 2014, available at: <http://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/2014/05/12/isis-zawahiri-egypt-army-sisi-morsi>, June 17, 2014.

29 "Saudi King puts al-Qaeda, ISIS, Al-Nusra Front, Hezbollah, Muslim Brotherhood on the terrorists list," Saudi Arabia: *Albriyadh Newspaper* (in Arabic), March 8, 2014.

30 Office of the Spokesperson, "Terrorist Designations of Groups Operating in Syria," May 14, 2014, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/05/226067.htm>, June 18, 2014.

31 "Obama draws 'red line' for Syria on chemical and biological weapons," *NBC News*, August 20, 2012, available at: http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/08/20/13379062-obama-draws-red-line-for-syria-on-chemical-and-biological-weapons, June 17, 2014.

32 "Statement by the President on Syria," The White House, August 31, 2013, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/31/statement-president-syria>, June 17, 2014.

33 "Joint Statement on Syria," The White House, September 6, 2013, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/06/joint-statement-syria>, June 17, 2014.

34 "Jarba calls for weapons for Syrian rebels on Washington trip," *Asharq Al-Awsat (English Website)*, May 8, 2014, available at: <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/05/article55332066>, June 18, 2014.

35 "Washington's message to Jarba: Fighting against ISIS is more important than ousting Assad," London: *Asharq Al-Awsat (The Middle East)*, May 10, 2014.

36 "Obama meets Jarba: not mention the militarization of rebels," London: *Asharq Al-Awsat (The Middle East)*, May 14, 2014.

37 "Syria promulgates National Anti-terrorist Act," Xinhuanet.com, July 2, 2012, available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-07/02/c_112340172.htm, June 20, 2014.

38 "Assad: Syria faces not a Civil War, but Terrorism by Proxies," *The Voice of Russia*, November 9, 2012, available at: http://radiov.com.cn/2012_11_09/94049721/, June 20, 2014.

39 Hussein Haridy, "The Middle East and the Gulf at a Crossroads," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No.1202, June 19, 2014.

40 UN Security Council Draft Resolution S/2014/348, May 22, 2014, available at: http://www.un.org/zh/documents/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/348&referer=/zh/&Lang=E, June 22, 2014.

41 UN Security Council Provisional S/PV.7180, May 22, 2014, p 5, available at: http://www.un.org/zh/documents/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.7180, June 22, 2014.

42 *Ibid.*, p.7.

43 *Ibid.*, p.13.

44 *Ibid.*, p.14.