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Three facts on Syria that are best said aloud

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“Both Syria and the wider world would not benefit from the creation of another Libya.”

There are many ways to respond to a war that brings death to life on television screens but the one chosen by UNICEF to address the continuing onslaught on Eastern Ghouta in Syria should not be an option.

The UN children’s agency refused to describe civilian suffering as the result of the Syrian regime’s bombardment of the Damascus suburb and simply released a blank statement. It was saying it had no words, that the hideous truth lies beyond language.

The gimmick drew some attention but said nothing of what needed desperately to be said. As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel said, words can sometimes attain the quality of deeds. Silence is not an acceptable statement. Far better to speak to the facts. For Syria, these are plain and come in the form of a doleful musical triad of dispiritingly harmonic notes.

First, this is Moscow’s war. When Russian President Vladimir Putin designated a daily 5-hour “humanitarian pause” in Eastern Ghouta to begin February 27, it was a roar of raw power.

Putin could loftily undermine UN efforts for a 30-day ceasefire and set his own conditions.

Within days of the supposed halt, a Kremlin spokesman could blandly dismiss the reality in Eastern Ghouta – that there has been no ceasefire and no humanitarian pause. Unchallenged, unblinking and unashamed, Moscow could put the blame squarely on the rebels.

Second, the Assads aren’t going anywhere.

Bashar Assad’s regime is still ensconced in Damascus. This has been true since the fall of rebellious Aleppo, Syria’s second city, more than a year ago. Now, the regime appears even more comfortable and unlikely to soon be displaced.

In February, it was able even to devote mindspace and military planning to Turkey’s Afrin incursion. In this context, Washington’s proposed approach to Syria sounds out of time and ridiculous. The approach has been described by some Trump administration officials as “return of the state, not return of the regime.”

Is that even realistic? How does one achieve that? Would the United States really

go to war with Russia for the right to bring down the Syrian regime?

Third, no one wants another Libya.

There is a strong argument for preventing the collapse of the Syrian state. Both Syria and the wider world would not benefit from the creation of another Libya, where the strongman is hounded out as part of a foreign-supported plan and chaos rules for years afterward.

Pulling down the regime, even one so brutal and unrepresentative, would only make sense if there were a viable, progressive alternative acceptable to the Syrian people. So far, that hasn’t been the case.

Those are the three hard facts and they’re better said aloud than any blank statement or even the international lament over Syria’s suffering. The caterwauling would sound a truer note if there were any move to properly examine UN human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini’s recent observation on who is responsible for continuing carnage.

Eastern Ghouta, Yemen, areas of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Hussein said, had become “some

of the most prolific slaughter-houses of humans in recent times” because of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

He slammed their “pernicious use of the veto.” Over and over, they have used the veto power to allow multiple conflicts to continue across the planet, permitting thousands to be maimed and killed. In Syria (and Yemen), the Russians will not allow the world to censure or restrain their allies of convenience, the Assad regime and Iran. With respect to the Palestinian territories, the United States will not allow Israel to be rebuked for its brutality.

Hussein is right to press the French initiative, which seeks to prevent the use of veto power in situations in which a mass atrocity has occurred. Britain is on board with that (along with 115 other UN members) but most of the permanent members of the Security Council – Russia, the United States and China – are not.

That is the shocking reality of the Syrian situation. Rather than blank statements, it is better addressed by words that urge action.

A shift to moderate Islam would be Saudi Arabia's biggest victory

Ahmed Abou Douh

is an Egyptian writer.



“Saudi Arabia will find it hard to achieve the qualitative changes that it seeks without getting rid of religious extremism.”

Will the new millennial generation of Saudi leadership transcend the legacy of the country’s founders?

Are we witnessing the birth of a new Saudi model, more modern and up-to-date?

Is 20th-century Saudi Arabia over the hill and is the birth of a stronger, more vigorous and enduring Saudi Arabia unavoidable?

The answer to these questions is: Yes. This is the dawn of the fourth Saudi kingdom.

The change within the Saudi military aims to give the kingdom a new military reality away from the traditions of a conservative society. The reshuffle of the leadership was needed so the quiet and gradual changes in Saudi military society could be implemented.

There seems to be in motion a plan to secularise military institutions and prepare them to accept modernisation programmes. More concretely, the military should accept and respond to the new plans for a local military industry and, therefore, needs to be open to new technologies.

It won’t be possible to free the Saudi military from extremist religious ideas except through a greater role for women. That Saudi women are allowed to join the armed forces will help transform Saudi society in much the same way as having mixed-gender schools. Starting with the army, Saudi Arabia is moving towards the required level of normalisation of male-female relations.

This normalisation remains incomplete and insufficient to



Moderate interpretation. A Saudi man and a child read a copy of the Quran, Islam’s holy book, inside a mosque. (AFP)

introduce a social revolution. Political and economic reforms are not always sufficient to bring about fundamental changes in a country’s capacities. The real engine for social change is social reforms. These reforms are in their infancy in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia will find it hard to achieve the qualitative changes that it seeks without getting rid of religious extremism, for it is through religious extremism that the world knows Saudi Arabia and it is through exactly this prism that Saudis identify their country.

For decades, Saudi Arabia was the beacon of the most conservative and traditionalist forms of Islamic jurisprudence. During the 1970s, a strong wave of religious

conservatism known as the “Islamic renaissance” swept through the kingdom unchecked and uncontrolled. It became impossible to control the spread of the wave in the Muslim world and the non-Muslim world alike. Its intellectual charge was not clear then, which perhaps accounted for its non-political flavour, but its effects were devastating.

Saudi religious conservatism ebbed and waned and affected the region in an inconsistent way. When it gained strength, Saudi monarchs, such as King Fahd, tried to confront it and clip its wings. Such confrontations, however, were mostly carried out through advancing alternative views and interpretations with no real effect on Saudi reality.

Salafist groups use religion to control the society at large. They survived and protected themselves by accommodating the mood of local authorities, so much so that no Islamic country was free of Salafist strongholds. These strongholds were real ambassadors for Saudi Salafist dogmas. Such was the world’s view of Saudi Arabia.

Now, the winds of change are blowing over Saudi Arabia. There is a real determination to face problems rather than sweep them under the rug. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz was wise enough to realise the nature of his role and its momentous fatality to take Saudi Arabia out of the culture of the 1930s, when it was founded, and into a different world.

Saudi Arabia of the previous millennium is giving way to Crown Prince Mohammed’s new Saudi Arabia where the role of women looms large.

Those revolutionary decisions – to allow women to drive, attend football games, concerts, festivals and national celebrations – will remain at the embryonic stage unless religious extremists are confronted and called to order. Some Salafist extremists and Muslim Brothers are media stars and are active in mosques and social media. Others remain hidden under the cover of official religious institutions.

Changes in the Saudi military were timely. The war in Yemen has become long-drawn-out with no sign of a clear victory over Iran-supported Houthis.

However, a shift towards moderate Islam would constitute Saudi Arabia’s biggest victory.

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