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**Vol 28 No 04**

**April 2020**

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Hello to All. I will start this message with sincere wishes that this Newsletter finds you and yours well.

Never in my wildest imagination, did I dream that I would be addressing a group of comrades under such life-style altering conditions. What can I tell you, other than to remind you, that we are all in this together, and while staying at home during this time is extremely important, you must

make efforts to ensure you do not become withdrawn from the rest of the world. Make efforts to get outside your home and go for a walk in your neighborhood (while maintaining that

all important physical distance of 2 meters from anyone else). Should you need assistance in conducting im-

portant tasks at home, please contact those organizations that are setup to offer that assistance. If you want to talk, the phone number for every Member of the BoD of our Institute can be found on this page. They are posted there for a reason. Please use them.

In compliance with the direction provided by our Federal and Provincial Governments and Health Authorities we must announce that all USINNI activities (BoD meeting and monthly Luncheon meeting) for the month of



Canadian Forces personnel stand by to assist Canadians evacuated from China in Trenton, Ont., on Feb. 7, 2020.  
Edward Wang/Reuters

## MILITARY AND SECURITY MUSINGS

### Syria; Act 27, Scene 2

### "ENTER NEW VILLIANS"

**Nanaimo, Spring 2020...** it's been about 20 months since we last focussed on Syria. Much has changed since then, while much hasn't. Syria is one of those places occupied by homo sapiens for somewhere in the range of an almost unimaginable 700,000 years, although the first evidence of a

settled society dates to about 10,000 BCE. Syria's capital, Damascus, is reputed to have been a built-up community, continuously occupied, since about 3,000 BCE.

However, that's all just "colour" and background for you. We want instead to suggest just why and how Syria re-

mains a vital if unpredictable lynchpin to the Muddle East circa 2020. The “muddle” is not a typo by the way; just how we see the Region. Modern history finds the Turks, the French, the British, the League of Nations, the United Nations, all followed now variously by Americans, Russians, Iranians, Turks (again) and the Europe-



ans, all trying to redesign Syria for the Syrians; good luck that! Syria sits smack in the middle of the Levant. They are today, as before, at the very centre of a clash of civilizations. Inevitably too, the recent “termination” of Iran’s Quassem Soleimani will yet have uncertain and probably messy consequences for any and all who are involved in Middle Eastern affairs.

#### President’s Message Continued from page 1

April have been cancelled. Other meetings that Members of the BoD had scheduled with outside organizations have also been cancelled.

During this trying time, it is imperative that we all try to remain grateful to those that have stepped up to the task of taking care of the rest of us. To our police and fire services, our doctors and nurses, our social services employees, our grocery outlets, our take out and food delivery retailers, the list goes on and on, we say thank you, we owe you so much.

Please, take care of yourself and yours, stay safe and well. Normal will come back to us.

Edwin

The problem for we, on the outside looking in, is that it simply hasn’t registered on most Westerners that there are multiple long-lived wars ablaze in Syria, the most current of which date back at least fifty years, when Airforce General Hafez al Assad highjacked the socialist Ba’athist regime lodged in Damascus. The al Assads are a Shia Muslim extended family with well-grounded roots in Syrian and, to a lesser extent, Arab nationalism. The family are at the core of a minority Shia Alawite clan that has progressively managed to garner & concentrate state-power to itself at the expense of a much larger Sunni Muslim community that is a clear majority in Syria. That Sunni Muslim majority restlessly rises up in rebellion every decade or so, leading to increasingly harsh repression by the central government. The al Assads have survived Nasserism, at least two major Sunni rebellions, consistently-lost wars with Israel, an Arab Spring that really never caught on in Syria, and, finally, the Sunni Salafist rebellion that seems, but may not actually be, on its last legs in both Syria and Iraq. With considerable help from some of Syria’s minority Kurd, Druze, Turkmen, Circassian, Greek, Assyrians, Armenian & Yazidis communities, plus significant

**“Syria’s own Mukhabarat, with help from Syria’s many allied militant minority groups, will now engage in a cleansing of Syrian society that will be of unparalleled ferocity, even by Syrian standards.”**

help from the Russians, the Iranians and Lebanon’s Shia Hezbollah, Bashar al Assad remains secure at the helm in Damascus, but in a Nation State much of it now just smoking ruins, with millions of Syrians left refugees, internally or abroad.

The way back will be a difficult one for the Syrians. Russian and Iranian help was and is crucial to Syr-

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ia’s recovery, but they too will very quickly wear out the welcome mat. The Iranians are not Arabs, while the vast majority of Syrians of every ilk are. Most Syrians dislike and distrust the Iranians on historical, secular or sectarian grounds, or, combinations thereof. And, mixed in with this witches’ brew, is the systemic criminality typical of the clan social structure so much a feature of Middle Eastern life today. State-sanctioned crime is endemic to the Levant, especially when the victims in the end are Europeans or North Americans.

For the Syrians, what follows once Russia, Iran & Turkey declare their “mission accomplished,” will be a settling of the scores by al Assad’s Mukhabarat, with help from many militant groups, engage in a cleansing of Syrian society of ferocity, I doubt there will be many show trials. The accused will simply be “fingere”, and then, with equal certainty, will be “disappeared” into unmarked graves. The numbers involved are not predictable, but it will be surprising if any form of reconciliation will be on the table. Provided he remains in good health, Bashar al Assad will be President of Syria through to the middle of this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, the more severe his treatment of Sunni Syrians, the more likely the Salafist fundamentalist rebellion will be renewed...for every action, there is always a reaction.

And, the losers? Well, the United States and Turkey failed in their declared goal of a Syria free of the al Assads. The Kurds will be rewarded for their fairly consistent support of al Assad, but the dream of Kurdistan remains just that; a faded-away dream. Iran’s influence has now peaked. As Persians they are simply not popular with or trusted by Iraq’s, Syria’s or Lebanon’s Arab majorities...Sunni or Shia alike. Western influence will

**“The real losers though are the Syrians themselves. Millions have been displaced; it’s not clear if or how they will all come back.”**

inevitably “mission accomplished,” settling of the al Assad’s Mukhabarat, with help from many militant groups, engage in a cleansing of Syrian society of ferocity, I doubt there will be many show trials. The accused will simply be “fingere”, and then, with equal certainty, will be “disappeared” into unmarked graves. The numbers involved are not predictable, but it will be surprising if any form of reconciliation will be on the table. Provided he remains in good health, Bashar al Assad will be President of Syria through to the middle of this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, the more severe his treatment of Sunni Syrians, the more likely the Salafist fundamentalist rebellion will be renewed...for every action, there is always a reaction.

also continue to wane into irrelevance throughout the entire region. The real losers though are the Syrians themselves. Millions have been displaced; it’s not clear if or how they will all come back.

And, the principal winners? With Turkey increasingly marginalized as a reliable NATO partner, Russia’s Mediterranean presence is enhanced without the assumption of any obvious regional liabilities. The Russians are already significant economic “partners” in Cyprus, so President Putin is left with a “Southern Front” that is reasonably secure. He can now focus on his real goal: weakening NATO’s presence in Eastern Europe; his Western Front. But that’s another story for another day.



This Musing Column is by Col (Retd) WJ (Bill) McCullough, MSC, CD, a Past President of our Institute and the now contentedly retired Chair of our Military & Security Committee. The Column is a product of his own continuing research, coloured by his own now fairly ancient but still extensive service in the Levant.

The views expressed are his own.

OPINION

**How can Canada’s military help in the coronavirus pandemic – and why has it largely avoided doing so?**

KEN HANSEN  
PUBLISHED MARCH 19, 2020  
UPDATED MARCH 20, 2020

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*and owner of Hansen Maritime Horizons. Retired from the Royal Canadian Navy in 2009 in the rank of commander, he is also a contributor to the security affairs committee for the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia.*

As the coronavirus situation worsens daily, medical experts have become decidedly less confident in their assessments about the new pandemic. Dr. Michael Gardam, an infectious-diseases specialist and a veteran of the SARS outbreak in Toronto, said in an interview on CBC Radio that the virus is now fully established in our population and that it will spread steadily; he expects the number of infected to double approximately every week. How far it will go is unknown, but estimates now suggest that between 40 and 70 per cent of the global population will contract COVID-19.

Dr. Gardam noted that he was especially concerned that the rate of transmission will overwhelm the capacity of the Canadian public-health system. That's what has occurred in Italy, where the influx of seriously ill patients in overtaxed hospitals has made standard triage practices and intensive-care procedures impossible. In an effort to prevent this overexertion, social distancing – an ancient concept employed as far back as the Black Death in Europe – is now widely being taken up to flatten the curve, or reduce the number of serious cases from crashing into the system all at once. But Dr. Gardam also said that large, empty spaces, such as high school gyms, that can be converted into basic medical units to treat those not ill enough to require intensive care might help add capacity, to give the curve a bit more breathing room.

So why aren't we talking about using Canadian military facilities?

The federal Liberals' defence policy clearly identifies a core mission for the military to "provide assistance to civil authorities and non-governmental partners in responding to international and domestic disasters or major emergencies." The key word here is "assistance," though: The military has no interest in leading or directing civil agencies in domestic scenarios. The norm is to wait until directed and then provide support only, not offering anything that will divert resources away from the more purely military core missions.

And in the early going, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has appeared to want to keep the military separate from the civilian effort. The Canadian Armed Forces only launched its own preparations in response to the virus's spread in early March, and only around its military obligations.

But one of the big problems is that military medical capacity that could help with the pandemic has withered away. The Department of National Defence has hospitals across Canada in all of its major bases, though most have been downgraded to secondary treatment facilities, now known as health-service centres. They no longer house overnight patients; imaging and diagnostics, along with surgical procedures, are typi-

cally done by provincial hospitals. The military maintains only enough capacity in these centres to generate a deployable medical facility with its field-hospital units, and only when a major expeditionary operation is assigned by the government, normally with six months of warning time.

The Disaster Assistance Response Team is usually how the Canadian Armed Forces provides medical care in an emergency, but it's limited. With a capacity of just 100 outpatients and 10 in-patients, that team can only serve as a stopgap, and it is usually deployed externally, rather than used in domestic situations.

The military has made one contribution so far – in February, CFB Trenton was used to house Canadian evacuees from China who needed to quarantine for 14 days. The base was an ideal fit: It had on-site transportation facilities with large sheltered spaces for screening, in addition to housing, food services and other administrative supports. Using bases could be productive if that resource is tapped.

There are other options, not even tied to land. Two new classes of ships now under construction in Halifax and Vancouver will have the ability to mount sea-cargo containers, which can be modified to fit a variety of purposes.

The six DeWolf-class Arctic-patrol vessels have HVAC, water, power and data connections for six such containers, while the two Canadian derivatives of the German Bonn-class sustainment ships are designed to carry 78 cargo containers, of which 23 pre-outfitted containers could be stacked three-high to form a medical facility. These vessels can serve as mobile medical clinics for screening tests, which would be especially invaluable in remote Northern communities, which tend to cluster around coastlines. Indeed, the federal government has already flagged particular concern about the coronavirus's potential impact on remote Indigenous communities.

Developing flexible and modular tech in naval ships will have useful Canadian applications beyond this moment, too. When planned for flexibility from the outset, these kinds of modular sub-units, which can be moved from site to site, represent a new and flexible response to emergencies that especially challenge the medical capacities of underdeveloped and isolated communities.

In the U.S., the Federal Emergency Management Agency uses containers as portable housing for disaster-relief workers, while in Nova Scotia, Dalhousie University's MEOPAR project uses modular containers on ships as marine research laboratories as part of its national research-vessel task team.

The question now is whether the Canadian government will insist that the military plan for and obtain this kind of contingency capability. It may not be a typical approach, and this route may only be a contingency plan, but these are atypical times, requiring as many contingency plans as we can get. And these are the kinds of situations where the military is supposed to thrive.