

SYRIA VERDICT: ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Jayantha Dhanapala watches Syria bleed while the powers that be fail to act decisively

The two-year-old conflict in Syria rages on with the embattled dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad and his Ba'ath Party withstanding the attacks of a motley group of rebels supported by the West, and by the money-bag monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with Israel not far behind.

Dictatorships – whether unelected, elected or inherited – are unacceptable in this day and age, when the palpable consent of a sovereign people is paramount for the governance of independent countries. However, no regime change by self-appointed guardians of democracy from abroad can replace a genuine movement for change by the people, of the people and for the people.

INTERNATIONAL LAW

Applicable international law, even in the implementation of the controversial 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine, is very clear on this. Only the Security Council can take action in the name of maintaining international peace and security. The 10th anniversary of the infamously illegal invasion of Iraq, for the purpose of regime change and on the false pretext of eradicating weapons of mass destruction, was recently observed by massive bombings and blood-letting in Iraq – and with a weak government presiding over a faction-ridden country coping with unbridled violence.



Is this the future that awaits Syria?

ARAB UPRISINGS The Syria imbroglio differs from the Iraqi one in a number of ways. It emerged at the time of the

Arab Spring when Tunisia first and then Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Libya and other Arab countries saw the people rise spontaneously against dictatorial regimes with whom

the West and the rest of the world had been content to have normal and even cozy relations. The West supported these popular uprisings selectively.

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MIGUEL MEDINA/AP

CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE Internally-displaced Syrian families spend their day at the Maiber al-Salam refugee camp, along the Turkish border, in the northern province of Aleppo. The number of Syrians who have fled their conflict-ravaged homeland has surpassed 1.4 million, the United Nations refugee agency says. And it has warned that it will no longer be able to meet their medical needs.

Tunisia's revolt was autonomous and did not need foreign assistance to succeed. In the case of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi's resistance was soon swept away when the Western powers in the Security Council exploited voting abstentions by Russia and China to empower

NATO to enter the battle. Post-Gaddafi Libya remains divided by factions and is dangerously unstable today.

The revolt in Bahrain was suppressed because the Saudis supported the unpopular ruler in that country. Syria was the next target, and this suited

Israel's agenda since it lies on Israel's border, and Syrian territory on the Golan Heights remains occupied by Israel. The Arab world is divided in supporting the Syrian regime, which comes from the 12 percent Alawite sect of the Shia's in Syria, where the

Sunnis and Kurds demand power sharing as in Iraq.

And the Arab League suspended the Syrian regime and later gave the Syrian National Coalition that seat in its body. The fact is that a heterogeneous collection of groups, including the Jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra and other extremist groups suspected of al-Qaeda links, are benefiting from arms supplied by the Western supporters, and the wealthy Saudi and Qatari financiers of the rebel groups.

REGIONAL RIVALRY The rivalry between the Saudis and Qataris has complicated the Syrian problem. Syria is the linchpin of the Middle East, and its complex religious and ethnic mix can affect the whole region if it unravels. In the past, the connection between Lebanon and Syria was well-established; but today, the links between Syria and the Middle East are far wider and deeper. The explicit support for the Syrian regime by Hezbollah is sufficient to ensure that Israeli and Western opposition continues, and reports of Israeli missile attacks on Syria are no surprise. The Syrian regime has suffered a number of defections at senior military, official and diplomatic levels.

At international level, Russia remains the main supporter and arms supplier of the Assad regime. After the bitter lesson of the Libyan episode, Russia and China have vetoed any move by the West to obtain Security Council approval for action on Syria.

HUMANITARIAN COST The humanitarian cost of the war has been enormous. The heads of humanitarian agencies in the UN system took the unusual step of coming out with a joint statement, urging a political solution saying: "Enough,

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CONFLICT IN SYRIA

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As the controversy rages, the people of Syria are being killed and wounded, and cities including Damascus (the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world) are being destroyed – and with it, a priceless heritage of humankind...

enough... We, leaders of UN agencies charged with dealing with the human costs of this tragedy, appeal to political leaders involved to meet their responsibility to the people of Syria and to the future of the region.”

A death toll of more than 70,000 is tragic. The displacement of refugees (over 1.3 million, at the time of writing) has created problems for neighbouring countries – especially Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. The Palestinian refugees within Syria also face acute distress.

The UN’s efforts have been unproductive, but not for want of trying. First, Kofi Annan was appointed Special Envoy but gave up in the face of the intransigence of the parties. Lakhdar Brahimi succeeded him and talked of finding chinks in the blank wall that faced him. He is still trying to get the parties to the negotiating table, but the lack of unity among the rebel forces and a perception that negotiating with Assad instead of insisting on his resignation will perpetuate the ruling regime, stand in the way.

CHEMICAL WEAPONS A recent controversy surrounds the alleged use of chemical weapons, in particular the nerve gas Sarin. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) of 1993 bans chemical weapons universally, but Syria is among a very few states (including Egypt and Israel) which are not

party to the CWC. Its stocks of these weapons are probably small, but it is also likely that rebel groups have secured access to these weapons and used them to implicate the regime.

This likelihood is increased by the imprudent statement made by US President Barack Obama, desperately fighting against pro-Israeli and other war-mongering groups in the US, saying that the Assad regime would be crossing a “red line” if it used chemical weapons against its own people. This was a signal to all that if that red line was crossed, the US would shift from the sidelines of this conflict by providing intelligence and using light weapons, to actually putting boots on the ground.

Such a step would be a giant flip backwards for Obama, who came into power to extricate his economically troubled country from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq into which the preceding Bush administration had led the US, with disastrous consequences. Opinion polls in the US are against another war. Obama has now been forced to qualify his earlier statement by seeking answers to questions as to when and how the chemical weapons were used, and by whom.

He is unlikely to get clear-cut, unambiguous answers, especially since the UN-mandated team of experts has not been permitted to enter

Syria. The Russian offer to send its experts is likely to be rebuffed by the Western powers, who doubt the credibility of Russian experts.

CEASEFIRE IMPETUS As the controversy rages, the people of Syria are being killed and wounded, and cities including Damascus (the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world) are being destroyed – and with it, a priceless heritage of humankind. The contending parties have to first agree to a ceasefire, with a UN peace-keeping force to supervise it. The next step would be to negotiate in order to form a coalition government that can bring a stable peace and genuine democracy to Syria, with the Ba’ath Party included, with or without Assad.

Russia must pressure Assad. And the West, Saudi Arabia and Qatar must persuade Syria’s coalition to take these steps, since outright victory for either party is unlikely in this stalemate where all are losers. Indeed, it is rumoured in Washington that Obama favours the pragmatic Brigadier General Salim Idris, the commander of the rebels’ Supreme Military Council, to end the war in a Russian-brokered deal. Pending a peaceful solution, supplies of arms to the rebels, while Russia supplies arms to the Assad regime, would be a regression to the proxy wars of the Cold War era... while Syria bleeds.



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