

Russia's Impossible Position on Syria

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The uprising in Syria is increasingly veering towards a full-fledged civil war, which raises legitimate fears for the stability of the Middle East as a whole and, more critically, for Russia's credibility on the international front.

What began as popular demonstrations demanding political reforms and public accountability in January 2011 has turned into an armed uprising, pitting the Syrian army against the main armed opposition group, the Free Syrian Army. Unlike Libya where a lot of Muammar Gaddafi's troops rapidly defected to join the insurgents, the Syrian government troops remain, by and large, loyal to Bashar al-Assad and the Ba'ath regime. Aiding the official troops are the Shabiha – “thugs” –, armed Alawite militiamen who terrorize and kill indiscriminately in support of the President. These Shabiha are held responsible for the massacre in Houla, which left 109 dead including 49 children on May 26th, as well as the more recent one in Hama, where 78 people, half of them women and children, were killed on June 6th¹. These massacres are only the latest instalment in a brutal repression led by the Syrian regime, responsible for the death of around 12.000-15.000 people since the uprising began, according to the London based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights². Facing the loyalist forces, the Free Syrian Army suffers from a fragmented lead-

ership and from the lack of organised civilian coordination. The Syrian National Council is the political coalition who heads the opposition, armed and civil, but it remains a fragmented body with divergent opinions on the means to put an end to the Assad regime. These divisions further weaken the opposition's action and prevent a rapid end to the violence³.

The uprising in Syria has devastated the country but the instability does not stop at its borders. All over the region, the Middle Eastern countries are keeping a careful eye on the deteriorating situation. Lebanon, under constant influence from its large and meddlesome neighbour, still has fresh memories of its own civil war that lasted from 1975 to 1990. Iraq, to the East, is still a powder keg of sectarian tension while, to the North, Turkey is increasingly worried about the influx of refugees from Syria. The Turkish government has lately been a very critical voice on the action of the Assad regime, openly supporting a foreign military intervention to stop the bloodshed⁴. Even further, the whole world watches in horror as the death toll rises. The latest massacres, in Houla and Hama, have marked another step in the determination of the international community to put a stop to the unrest in Syria. However, here too, disagreements on how to obtain it are rife.

³ “After a Year, Deep Divisions Hobble Syria's Opposition”, The New York Times, 23/02/2012.

⁴ “Syria: Turkey threatens to invoke Nato's self-defence article”, The Telegraph, 13/04/2012 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>) (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

¹ “Le massacre d'Houla illustre l'affaiblissement du régime syrien”, Le Monde, 28/05/2012; «Syrians Bar U.N. Monitors From a Massacre Inquiry», The New York Times, 07/06/2012.

² <http://syriahr.com/>.

Since the uprising began, the UN has been the main talking shop for all matters Syrian, but without achieving any real progress on the issue. The best initiative so far, the Kofi Annan peace plan, is a classic case of “too little, too late”. Sponsored by the Arab League, this six-point plan enforces a cease-fire and is monitored by 300 unarmed military observers from the UN, deployed from April onwards⁵. Unfortunately, as the deaths in Houla and Hama can attest, the cease-fire is untenable. Kofi Annan himself, the UN and Arab League emissary, admitted to the UN General Assembly that the plan “is not being implemented”, blaming the Syrian government for the intensification of the conflict⁶. Thus far, the action of the international community has been insufficient. On whom does the responsibility for this inaction lie? Partly on the rigid position that Russia and China have adopted at the UN Security Council.

The Security Council (SC) is the primary organ responsible for “the maintenance of international peace and security”⁷ and has the power to grant legitimacy and legality to any armed intervention, if it deems it necessary. Its five permanent members – the US, Russia, China, France and the UK – all have veto powers on the SC resolutions and, ultimately, have the final say on international security. If one of these countries decides to oppose a decision, nothing happens, the UN is paralyzed and diplomats are left scrambling to find a more agreeable proposition. In 2011, the Security Council was able to come together on the crisis in Libya, by passing a resolution authorizing military intervention by NATO forces. Resolution 1973 on the situation in Libya stressed the need to “to take all necessary measures (...) to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in [Libya]”, notably by the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace⁸. This provided the necessary warrant for a 9-month long air campaign by NATO forces against Gaddafi’s troops, ending in the ousting and subsequent death of the Libyan dictator. Resolution 1973 was passed because Russia and China, traditionally opposed to any sort of foreign intervention, abstained dur-

ing the vote. Later, the Russian leadership vehemently criticized the scale and intensity of NATO’s campaign in Libya. Then Prime minister, Vladimir Putin, likened the strikes to a “medieval crusade”, calling the resolution “deficient and flawed”⁹. His remarks were tempered by President Medvedev but criticisms of the operation continued. In particular, Russia accused the Western countries of arming the Libyan opposition and of promoting “regime change” under the sanction of a UN resolution¹⁰. Ever since then, Moscow has stood firm against such a turn of events in Syria¹¹.

As the massacres in Syria continue and as the death toll rises, Russia’s position and apparent backing of the Assad government is being increasingly derided by other countries speaking out against Russian obstruction at the Security Council¹². The question therefore is what Russia hopes to achieve and why it continues to obstruct Western propositions on Syria.

Russia’s “line in the sand” is clear: it will oppose any form of foreign intervention in Syria. Be it political support for the Syrian National Council, arms delivery to the Free Syrian Army or direct military intervention, Moscow says *nyet*. The only way out, according to Russia, is a negotiated solution between the government and the opposition, followed by peaceful political reforms. There is no talk of regime change or transfer of power, Russia is steadfast in its determination to appear as a neutral and disinterested observer of the situation. And because of the Libyan precedent, it is wary of any SC resolution which might be viewed as taking sides in the conflict. Thus, the deadlock at the UN continues, even as the violence grows and the Western Powers call for a united front against the Assad repression¹³. But, as time passes and a civil war appears ever more likely, the window of opportunity for a positive international action becomes narrower.

9 “Putin likens UN Libya resolution to crusade call”, Ria Novosti, 21/03/2011 (<http://en.rian.ru/>) (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

10 “No UN mandate for Libyan ground operations, regime change – Lavrov”, Russia Today, 17/04/2011 (<http://rt.com/>) (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

11 “Russia, China-led bloc opposes Syria intervention”, AFP, 07/06/2012 (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

12 « Clinton Says Intervention in Syria Requires Russian Support », The New York Times, 31/05/2012.

13 “Pour Hollande, ‘pas de solution possible’ en Syrie ‘sans le départ d’Assad’”, Le Monde, 01/06/2012; “Clinton tells Assad to quit, leave country”, Reuters, 07/06/2012 (<http://www.reuters.com/>) (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

5 “Security Council authorizes UN observer mission in Syria, Ban welcomes decision”, UN News Centre, 21/04/2012. (<http://www.un.org/>) (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

6 “Remarks to the General Assembly meeting on the situation in Syria by the Joint special Envoy - New York”, UN News Centre, 07/06/2012 (<http://www.un.org/>) (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

7 UN Charter, Chap. V, art. 24.

8 S/RES/1973 (2011).

Russia's – and China's – inflexible attitude at the SC is rightly construed by a large portion of the international community as a blank cheque for Bashar al Assad. As long as the Syrian regime has the backing of both these permanent SC members, it can continue to try and regain control of the situation by destroying the opposition. So while Russia professes a neutral course of action, holding both the government and the opposition responsible for the unrest, this posture is a direct support to al Assad. Russia's backing of Syria can be explained by three main reasons: geopolitics, principle and prestige.

Russia's first motivation in propping up the Syrian regime comes from plain old geopolitics. Syria has been a long-time ally and friend of the Soviet Union, then of Russia. Trade – including of weapons – between the two partners has been an important component in this continued friendship. Syria also hosts a Russian naval base in Tartus, allowing a small but symbolic military presence outside of the Former Soviet Union. All these elements converge in establishing Damascus as Russia's main vector of influence in the Middle East. As long as this relation lasts, Russia will have a valuable foothold in this highly strategic region. This geopolitical aspect is useful to understand why Russia immediately came to the Syrian regime's support when the unrest began, early in 2011. However, it is not sufficient anymore in light of the continuing conflict. Indeed, by strongly coming out in favour of al Assad, Russia burned its bridges with the opposition: if the Syrian president is deposed, a new government will promptly sever all former ties with Moscow. So, in a way, Russia is doomed to continue backing al Assad in order to hedge its bets. At the same time, continuing support means more instability, which is counterproductive for Russian political and economic interests in the region. Because of the scope of the unrest and whatever the outcome, Russia has already lost a lot on the geopolitical front. Thus, we must turn to other motives to help us understand Russia's diplomatic posture.

The second reason that Russia holds fast against any and all talk of regime change or foreign intervention is a matter of principle. For Russian political thinking, international law trumps all. And the main building block of international law is state sovereignty which must be upheld at all cost. Russia – and China – are especially prickly about non-

interference in the affairs of the state in light of numerous precedents, mainly by Western powers, to impose democracy in the world. For example, in 1999, NATO launched an air campaign against Serbia in order to stop the massacres in Kosovo. This was done despite Russian opposition by bypassing the Security Council. At the time, Russia was a secondary player on the international scene, slowly recovering from the turmoil of the 1990s and from the financial crisis of 1998, which helps to explain why it felt frustrated and helpless when the West acted without its consent. The Kosovo precedent is still very much alive in Russian political thinking and shares many similarities with the Syrian situation: a long-time ally being subdued by the West with a humanitarian pretext... But there are other episodes of foreign “democratic” intervention that Moscow remembers: Iraq in 2003 and its subsequent destabilisation; the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, widely believed to have been instances of Western meddling; and the 2011 campaign in Libya which ended with the death of Gaddafi followed by the coming to power of a weak and fragmented opposition. All these events are proof – for Russia – of the West's goal to impose its model on the world, by ousting opponents and being a force of destabilization rather than the opposite. It is no surprise that Russia and China hold international law and state sovereignty so dearly since their own regimes can hardly be considered democratic. If foreign intervention becomes a habit, then who's to say that Moscow and Beijing won't be the next targets?... The speculation is highly unlikely but can be used to explain why Russia will uphold legal principles over humanitarian necessity.

Lastly, Russia continues to support the Syrian regime for reasons of prestige and status. Simply put, by preventing any solution outside of the UN frame and without its consent, Russia is guaranteed to remain a key player in the handling of this and other international situations. That is why Moscow is keen to suggest its own solutions, notably an international conference including the SC members and Syrian neighbours like Iran¹⁴. While the proposal has its merits, the indirect aim is clear: to keep the process firmly in Russian hands. As the deaths pile up in Houla or Hama, Moscow has made its policy a question of international prestige. In order to maintain its status as a Great Power on the world scene, Russia will continue

¹⁴ “Lavrov Guarantees ‘No External Intervention’ in Syria”, Ria Novosti, 07/06/2012 (<http://en.rian.ru/>) (retrieved on 08/06/2012).

to insist that all matters Syrian must be treated by the Security Council all the while maintaining a veto on any resolution unfavourable to Russian interests or suggesting outside intervention. The real problem is not that it opposes intervention Syria but that it does so very firmly. As of now, there is no way that al Assad can be allowed to remain in place. His people won't accept it and his continued grip on power will only serve to destabilize the whole region. An outside military intervention is highly unlikely – Syria's geographic and demographic configuration would make any military foray very costly with little chance of rapid success – but the threat of an intervention must remain on the table for the Syrian regime to seriously weigh the consequences of continued repression. As long as Russia reiterates daily that it opposes foreign intervention and regime change, then al Assad will feel free to maintain his bloody hold on the country.

Russia's position on Syria is not surprising given its foreign policy. In terms of Realpolitik it is understandable, though realism should never preclude an end to such massive bloodshed. However, even if we set aside the moral dimensions, Russia's attitude has its drawbacks. Indeed, by insisting that the UN Security Council take the lead, Moscow is sure to be at the forefront of the diplomatic scene. Nevertheless, by blocking any possibility or even any talks of further action, Russia risks weakening the Security Council and encouraging outside powers to intervene without a UN sanction. As difficult and dangerous as such a scenario is, it becomes ever more likely as reports of civilian massacres keep pouring in. Should this happen, and should the UN be bypassed once again because of Russian obstructionism, the whole foundation of international law will be severely undermined. The exact opposite of what Russia supports will then happen. This is in no one's interest as unsanctioned military operations will act as another destabilizing factor in the region. To prevent this while contributing to a solution to the Syrian conflict, Russia must become a force for progress in the diplomatic negotiations and support further action against the Syrian leadership. If the Security Council can agree to pass strong sanctions against al Assad's entourage, this will be a clear signal that Russia is prepared to be a responsible player on the world scene and will serve to make Damascus more inclined to listen to reason and stop the bloodshed. The only peaceful scenario

left for Syria is a Yemen scenario where Bashar al Assad is convinced by the outside powers – Russia in the forefront – that he cannot remain in place, all the while guaranteeing him a safe exile abroad. This solution would end the massacres and pave the way for a peaceful transition of power all the while maintaining Russia as a key player in the diplomatic arena. But in order for this option to remain feasible, Moscow can not delay in making its intentions clear. A peaceful transition is always preferable to military intervention. But, should the deadlock remain, there won't be any option left except the military one. And Russia will have no one to blame for the turn of events but itself.

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