

## America's "Syrian Friends" and "Afghan Foes" are the Same People

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It's puzzling how the US can treat radical Islamists in Syria as allies while fighting against them as enemies in Afghanistan, says the chair of the Russian parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Washington's double standard approach is evident in the Syrian crisis. It supports the armed opposition, which wants to turn the country into a dictatorship, claiming that their war against the Assad government has democracy as the goal, Aleksey Pushkov told RT.

RT: Do you think the events unfolding in Syria are in line with the interests of the Syrian people?

Aleksey Pushkov: There is a civil war going on in Syria, and it is only the Syrian political opposition that is benefiting from it. The opposition took up arms and uses violence to achieve their goal. I am convinced that most Syrians don't want to have this armed conflict.

It is well-known that the armed opposition groups persecute the Christian community in Syria. Thousands of Christians were driven out of their towns and villages. Shia Muslims, a minority in the country - they make up 13 per cent - are also targeted by armed Sunni radicals who represent the majority in the armed opposition.

Minorities are killed, as we saw in Houla, and driven out. There is a town in Syria called Hama, right now it is controlled by the militants. And there are basically no local residents left in Hama. They have either been killed or fled the city.

And in this situation the so-called "Friends of Syria" and Hillary Clinton tell us that the armed opposition is fighting for democracy. The armed opposition is not fighting for democracy; they are fighting for a dictatorship. It will be a dictatorship of the forces that they are trying to bring to power to replace Assad. It is clear by now that it has nothing to do with democracy. We can draw this conclusion from the way this armed opposition is acting. They don't want any negotiations, they don't want to comply with the Annan plan, they don't want to create a transition government; they don't want anything. What they want is to have all the power in the country.

I don't quite understand how the US can support the armed opposition, because these are the same kind of people who blow up American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, and kill NATO troops in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, they are considered enemies of the United States, while here they are treated as allies.

I don't think this insurgency would have had any serious prospects without external support.

But they have this external financial and political support. They get weapons from outside, therefore it's not just an uprising without a serious future - it's a civil war that split the country in half, as a result of external interference.

RT: But what are these outside forces actually trying to achieve? Why would they want to wage war?

AP: The US in particular wants to topple the Assad regime, which has long been considered anti-American. I believe Assad's good relations with Russia have also played a role. Washington treats any government on friendly terms with Russia with a degree of skepticism, to put it mildly. So they would rather replace it with a regime more supportive of the US.

As for Islamist or Wahhabi monarchies in the Gulf like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain, they seek to model the Syrian regime after their own. They would like to cover all women under black veils, lock them up at home, and strip them of their electoral rights. In case of dissent, the government would follow the example of Bahrain and open fire against its own people. This kind of conflict is not unique to Syria. But with the events in Bahrain, the US simply turned a blind eye because Bahrain is America's friend.

In other words, these Gulf countries would like the Sunnis to take power and establish a religious state just like in the Persian Gulf, and weaken the Shias, who have been ruling Syria, as well as Iran, which is currently regarded as Syria's ally. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain treat Iran with much animosity and see a toppled Assad as a way to weaken the Shia-Iran.

The whole situation has little to do with freedom and democracy. Not Saudi Arabia, nor Qatar or Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates have any democracy or freedom, and most of these states even lack a constitution. It would be ridiculous to assume that these undemocratic states can bring democracy to Syria. The Sunni-Shia confrontation adds a very important dimension to this conflict. Though often ignored, it plays a major role.

RT: Just recently, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, I quote, "Russia and China will pay a price, because they are holding up progress, blocking it. This is no longer tolerable." What's your reaction to the statement?

AP: All I see is that the US is paying a price for what it did in Iraq. For example, the US has lost a lot of its glamour and trust in its foreign policy. I would even go as far as to say that the occupation of Iraq prompted a crisis in US foreign policy. At the moment, even its staunch allies like Turkey or Egypt, along with the Western European countries, like Germany, the UK and France, saw a drastic hike in anti-American sentiment. The US has now paid a price for their occupation of Iraq.

Now Russia warns against the occupation of Syria. Russia says that it's Syrians who should decide their own future. Hillary Clinton may well voice her opinion, but it's no more than fantasy. I hear she's about to step down as Secretary of State so this must be her farewell fantasy.

RT: The US has clearly demonstrated that it's not going to back down over Syria. How far is Russia prepared to go?

AP: The conference on Syria held in Geneva in June adopted a roadmap, supported by the US, Russia and China. The countries agreed on the need to set up a transition government, to launch a dialogue between the government and the opposition. The participants agreed that it should be the representatives of the two warring parties that should start these talks. This blueprint was backed by Russia, the US, China and France – almost every country present. So it looks like a sensible solution.

But as soon as they put their signatures to the plan, a war of interpretation broke out. Hillary Clinton said that the plan implies that Assad must go, while Russia said the document does not even mention the name of Assad so it has nothing to do with his future. Russia insists that the document aims to end violence and start negotiations. And all this despite the fact that all the countries said they had reached a common understanding.

It's really strange when five minutes after you reach an understanding, the parties appear divided. Indeed, the countries did reach some common ground, albeit fragile, but again they tend to interpret it differently. This means a political battle is going on. Also, the rebels said they won't take part in any kind of talks, and refuse to be part of a transitional government. I think pro-rebel forces can easily do both – sign the Geneva plan and then tell the rebels to press on with the old ways – that being their fight against the Assad government.

RT: What does Russia propose?

AP: Russia insists on the agreements that have already been reached – that the sides should...

RT: But the rebels are against...

AP: Well, if the rebels don't want to join the negotiations, what can we do about it? We can't send in our troops and force them to do so. All we can do is to work hard to persuade the US to use their leverage. Washington signed the Geneva plan to set up a transition government. Therefore the US should now use its influence on the armed opposition in Syria to make them comply with it. Otherwise, their policy would look hypocritical – while making official statements in support of the negotiation process they in fact sabotage it.

We could also work to persuade the Assad cabinet not to renounce their support for negotiations and a transition government. In fact, the Assad government has agreed to the plan. And it is only the armed opposition, the rebels, who are against it. The US says that the rebels are ready to join the negotiations only after Assad has resigned. But this was never mentioned at the Geneva conference. We never signed any document that would say that Syria must change its regime under the influence of the external players. We say that Syrians must make their own decision. This is Russia's stance. Russia cannot work miracles, however it can and will maintain its stance.

RT: Many experts say that for the US, a war in Syria would pave the way to attack Iran. Do you think this scenario is possible?

AP: I believe there has been too much speculation on this issue. Personally, I don't quite see how a possible military strike against Iran is connected with Syria's future.

Amidst the economic havoc and domestic hostilities, Syria is clearly out of shape to attack any of the US allies in the Middle East. So should the US decide to wage a war on Iran, Syria will have little to do with it.

RT: Perhaps it could be a strategic base?

AP: There are many US allies in the Middle East, for example Jordan, but nobody ever calls Jordan a strategic base to attack Iran. I would not take these speculations seriously. To me, the issues of Iran and Syria are poles apart. Damascus is thought to be Iran's ally, so you need a regime change in Syria in order to weaken Iran. But in my opinion, this is all very far-fetched. Right now, Syria cannot be a fully-fledged ally to Iran. Too focused on its own domestic affairs, it can neither send its troops abroad, nor cause trouble for America's allies in the Middle East. So the argument that the US needs to crush Syria before taking on Iran holds little water.

You know that the issue of Iran is not about its military expansion or aggression. It is all about the nuclear weapons that Iran may acquire. This was a hot topic long before the Syria crisis; it's been on the agenda for about 12 years, with the US strongly against Iran going nuclear. This alone is enough to prove that the issue of Syria is very different from that of Iran. I would not link these two issues closely together.

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