

Jousting Over Syria: Obama and Putin at the UN

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa, Russia and FSU, USA](#)

President Barack Obama of the United States and President Vladimir Putin of Russia displayed, in various shades, facets of world power when they did battle at the United Nations yesterday. At the 70th annual session of the United Nations General Assembly, Syria loomed like an ominous hulk of concern.

It had to, radiating as it does regional and now international security concerns. The EU is in retreat, imposing controls on refugee flows, raising the fence and placing razor wire.

States outside the EU are themselves under domestic pressure to receive refugees, and have done so with varying degrees of constipated reluctance. Having cited the need for a comprehensive, global effort to deal with the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War, Obama avoided noting that his own administration had balked at the subject of leading the way. To date, there is the smallest of commitments to resettle 10,000 Syrians refugees. Organisations such as Human Rights First advocate an increase of this number by ten times.[1]

Obama's address was a sanctimonious revelation of US intent and power. The mask of decency was off. The US president decided to describe his evident distaste of Putin's Ukrainian approach, citing the annexation of Crimea as a violation of the "international order". This should have been far better described as disorder with a persistently stubborn hegemon using liberalism in the manner of a sexually transmitted disease.

Having thrown some dirt at the Putin train of thought, he then suggested that, "The United States is prepared to work with any nation, including Russia and Iran, to resolve the conflict." Then came the imperialist punch line. "But we must recognise that there cannot be, after so much bloodshed, so much carnage, a return to the prewar status quo." There would be a "transition" phase in Syrian politics, one that would entail the eventual removal of Assad. (Does US foreign policy ever "ease" leaders out, as opposed to pushing them?)

The not so ugly secret here is that the Obama administration has no choice in the matter, needing to involve Russia and Iran in any lasting security arrangement in the matter. The playground of Realpolitik demands it. The stumbling block here is one of regime change, which in Washington's pathological tendency: remove what supposedly does not conform to the US laundry list of rampant markets, corporate elites and compliant technocrats.

Obama's suggestions are also a recipe for chaos, an invitation to further mayhem cloaked by the veil of democratic reform and social change. Cynics of the effects of American policy would themselves suggest that, be it through design or stumbling, such efforts are, in fact, beneficial to the efforts of ISIS. The last thing the latter wish is for an Assad-governed Syria to continue.

Creating a vicious vacuum, one that would happen in any regime replacement, would invariably be a boon for the Islamic State, allowing them to further consolidate its pompously vicious caliphate. There would be an even more dramatic disequilibrium of violence. Hence the insistence by Putin in his address, and talks with Obama, that Assad is an indispensable feature to prevent any Islamist advance. "We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces, who are valiantly fighting terrorism face to face."

This gave Putin room to remind Obama what US policy had actually achieved in the Middle East since 2003. There was that largest of black spots, Iraq, and the removal of Saddam Hussein which ruptured the Sunni-Shiite divide. Then came the overthrow of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, releasing the fundamentalist drive in North Africa. The latter case has proven particularly relevant now, given the migration routes that sprung up from a porous, semi-anarchic state run by an assortment of radical groups.

Such publications as the *New York Times* have decided to read the Kremlin's ambitions in the area as pseudo-imperial, a standard reflex that bores as much as it irritates. "For the Kremlin [a broad coalition against the Islamic State] means restoring enough stability in Syria to win acceptance of an expanded role for Russia in the Middle East - not to speak of its expanded military presence." [2] The only basis for this reading is the recent Russian effort to move military assets to an airfield near Latakia in Syria.

Putin's suggestions for a united front utilising the Syrian government have also been fobbed off by the Western commentariat. Andrew S. Weiss, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is dismissive over the Putin "road map" on Syria, comprising what he sees as "a fuzzy concept of a grand coalition to fight terrorism arm in arm with Bashar al-Assad, the very man the Americans say is the source of the problem."

Weiss's reading is typically in search of clarity where there is none to be had. His historical reading on coalitions when made for the purpose of defence seems sketchy - most, except those initiated in pseudo-vassalage and deepest insecurity, tend to be fuzzy, tactical combines. They shift, transform and crumble when needed. With all that background scuffling taking place, some common ground could be found. Putin placed the prospect of bombing ISIS targets on the table. But importantly, he has never shied away from his understanding that Assad, like him or loathe him, stabilises. Tyrannies serve historical purposes in that sense, cruel as they may be. Eventual peaceful change will have to come from within.

The hegemonic, self-allocated mandate for Washington, on the other hand, is muscular, indecent and ultimately riddled with miscalculation. Discounting Syrian sovereignty through a collective loosely described as the free world is hardly a recipe for righting the wrongs in Syria.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/press-release/president-obama-highlights-refugee-crisis-governmen>

[t-repression-during-un-address#.Vglu6o2ITnY.twitter](#)

[2]

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/29/world/middleeast/obama-and-putin-clash-at-un-over-syria-crisis.html?_r=0

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