

The Perils of Certainty: Obama and the “Assad Regime”

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In Kuala Lumpur, the US president continued the line that Bashar al-Assad had to go. His approach, one that has failed on all fronts thus far, has been to marginalise Assad while supplying a fictional grouping of regime opponents conveniently designated “moderates”.

Again, such descriptions are useless in the battlefield where arms supplied by one backer are regularly channelled to another, be it through design or natural folly. This is a war of fanatical objectives and bloody outlines. It resists the moral codebook so conveniently, and disingenuously used, by the Obama administration and its allies.

Even as the Coalition pounds, however effectively, Islamic state positions, more covert operations are being directed, albeit it poorly, against Assad. Each time the Central Intelligence Agency has, since 2013, ventured to bolster a faction of anti-regime “moderates,” the results have been the same: defection, desertion, capture and overall incompetence. All in all, the number of CIA-trained forces remain sketchy, coming to approximately 10,000. Such a poor record was enough to waken some on the Hill as to the need to trim the agency’s operating budget.

The ones who are doing most of the dying and fighting are the ones who believe, be they the soldiers of the Assad regime itself, the Kurds, or the assortment of fundamentalist brigades from al-Nusra to Islamic State itself.

Even within the US political establishment, a sense that Washington ballsed up this particular issue is doing the rounds. Obama’s own deputy, Joe Biden, has expressly admitted that the policy of arming moderates was one that invariably ended up assisting al-Nusra and ISIS elements.

None of this should be surprising on peeking into his various foreign policy stances over the years. Biden has brought to his office a distinct scepticism about vast US deployments and meddling. He opposed the intervention in Libya that ultimately destabilised the country and saw the overthrowing of Muammar el-Qaddafi, while a very enthusiastic Hillary Clinton supported it.

House Representatives, already confused earlier in the year by what, exactly, to do with Assad, have made some moves that do not accord with the Obama White House. Such confused thinking manifested itself in the May 15 defence bill which did instruct the Pentagon to ensure that Syrian units opposed to Assad have the ability to combat him. But another provision also authorised the blacklisting of such units who proceeded to turn on Assad’s forces rather than those of Islamic State.[1] Clear, in such minds, as mud.

As Rep. Nick Nolan (D-Minn.) then explained, “We [have] spent literally trillions of dollars in the Middle East in what many would describe as wars of choice and nation building. All too often, the moneys have made a mockery of our good intentions and ended up in the wrong hands and in many cases used against us.”

House Representative Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii), along with Austin Scott (R-Ga.) went so far on Friday as to introduce legislation that would terminate what they have termed an “illegal war” to overthrow the Assad regime. There was only one true target in this duel, argued Gabbard: Islamic State.

“The US is waging two wars in Syria. The first is the war against ISIS and the other Islamic extremists, which Congress authorized after the terrorist attack on 9/11. The second war is the illegal war to overthrow the Syrian government of Assad.”[2] Scott reiterated the line. “Working to remove Assad at this stage is counter-productive to what I believe our primary mission should be.”

Notwithstanding such observations coming from sceptical voices in Washington, Obama insisted that, “It would not work to keep him in power. This is a practical issue, not just a matter of conscience.” Since when removing Assad was a matter of pragmatic consideration shows how distant Obama has been on the Syrian conflict.

A good degree of cynicism also accompanied the KL press conference. Obama decided to flag Putin that Moscow’s own options were limited. Abandon, he seemed to be saying, Assad, and we will have a better chance with fighting Russia’s real threat: Islamic State and its associates. Forget the piddly, murderous regime in Damascus and go in for the big win.

The signs, however, in convincing Moscow to yield to US unctuousness, are not good. Even the president’s own description did not leave much room for optimism on his part. “Russia has not officially committed to a transition of Assad moving out but they did agree to a political transition process. And I think we’ll find out over the next several weeks whether or not we can bring about that change with the Russians.”

In the meantime, French President François Hollande has been attempting to do some bridging politics. Since the Paris attacks, he has found more common ground with the Russian campaign against Islamic State. He has subsequently been fretting about bringing Obama and Putin onto common ground. Whether that common ground includes a patch allowing Assad to prevail in any post-Islamic State environment remains the teasing, and lingering question.

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Notes

[1]

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/congress-assad-defense-bill-contradictory-guidance-rebels.html#>

[2]

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/house-democrat-republican-urge-obama-to-focus-on-isis-not-assad/>

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