

The Road To Damascus...And On To Armageddon?

“Western politicians and media are not yet fighting World War III, but they are talking themselves into it.”

By [Diana Johnstone](#)

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Paris: What if pollsters put this question to citizens of the United States and the European Union :

“Which is more important, ensuring disgruntled Islamists freedom to overthrow the secular regime in Syria, or avoiding World War Three?”

I’ll bet that there might be a majority for avoiding World War III.

But of course, the question is never framed like that.

That would be a “realistic” question, and we Westerners from the heights of our moral superiority have no time for vulgar “realism” in foreign policy (except the eccentric Ron Paul, crying out in the wilderness of Republican primaries).

Because, in the minds of our political ruling class, the United States has the power to “make reality”, we need pay no attention to the remnants of whatever reality we didn’t invent ourselves.

Our artificial reality is coming into collision with the reality perceived by most or at least much of the rest of the world. The tenants of these conflicting views of reality are armed to the teeth, including with nuclear weapons capable of leaving the planet to insects.

Theoretically, there is a way to deal with this dangerous situation, which has the potential of leading to World War. It is called diplomacy. People capable of grasping unfamiliar ideas and understanding viewpoints other than their own, examine the issues underlying conflict and use their intelligence to work out solutions that may not be ideal but will at least prevent things from getting worse.

There was even an organizational structure created for this: the United Nations.

But the United States has decided that as sole superpower it doesn’t really need to stoop to diplomacy to get what it wants, and the United Nations has been turned into the instrument of US policy. The clearest evidence of this was the failure of the UN Security Council to block the NATO powers’ abuse of the ambiguous and contested Responsibility to Protect (“R2P”) doctrine to overthrow the Libyan government by force.

Early this year, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon rejoiced that: “The world has embraced the Responsibility to Protect – not because it is easy, but because it is right. We therefore

have a moral responsibility to push ahead.” Morality trumps the basic UN principle of national sovereignty. Ban Ki-moon suggests that pushing ahead with R2P is no less than the “next test of our common humanity”, and announces: “That test is here – in Syria.”

So, the Secretary General of the UN considers the “moral responsibility” of R2P his main guideline to the crisis in Syria.

In case there was any doubt, the Libyan example demonstrated what that means.

A country whose rulers do not belong to the Western club made up of NATO countries, Israel, the emirs of the Gulf states and the ruling family of Saudi Arabia, is wracked by opposition demonstrations and armed rebellion, with the mix of the two making it difficult to sort out which is which. Western mainstream media hasten to tell the story according to a standard template:

The ruler of the country is a “dictator”. Therefore, the rebels want to get rid of him simply in order to enjoy Western-style democracy. Therefore, the people must all be on the side of the rebels. Therefore, when the armed forces proceed to repress the armed rebellion, what is happening is that “the dictator is killing his own people”. Therefore, it is the Responsibility 2 Protect of the international community (i.e. NATO) to help the rebels in order to destroy the country’s armed forces and get rid of (or kill) the dictator.

The happy ending comes when Hillary Clinton can shout gleefully, “We came, we saw, he died!”

Thereupon, the country sinks into chaos, as armed bands rove, prisoners are tortured, women are put in their place, salaries are unpaid, education and social welfare are neglected, but oil is pumped and the West is encouraged by its success to go on to liberate another country.

That at least was the Libyan model.

Except that in the case of Syria, things are more complicated.

Unlike Libya, Syria has a fairly strong army. Unlike Libya, Syria has a few significant friends in the world. Unlike Libya, Syria is next door to Israel. And above all, the diversity of religious communities within Syria is much greater and more potentially explosive than the tribal divisions of Libya. The notion that “the people” of Syria are unanimously united in the desire for instant regime change is even more preposterous.

Electoral democracy is a game played on the basis of a social contract, a general consensus to accept the rule that whoever gets the most votes gets to run the country. But there are societies where that consensus simply does not exist, where distrust is too great between different sectors of the population. That could very well be the case in Syria, where certain minorities, including notably the Christians and Alawites, have reason to fear a Sunni majority that could be led by Islamists who make no secret of their hostility to other religions. Still, perhaps the time has come to overcome that distrust and build an electoral democracy with safeguards for minorities. However, the one sure way to set back such a move toward democracy is a civil war, which is certain to revive and exacerbate hatred and distrust between communities.

Last month, on this site Aisling Byrne called attention to results of a public opinion poll funded by no less than the Qatar Foundation, which cannot be suspected of working for the Assad regime, given the Qatar royal family's lead position in favor of overthrowing that regime. The key finding was that "while most Arabs outside Syria feel the president should resign, attitudes in the country are different. Some 55% of Syrians want Assad to stay, motivated by fear of civil war – a specter that is not theoretical as it is for those who live outside Syria's borders. What is less good news for the Assad regime is that the poll also found that half the Syrians who accept him staying in power believe he must usher in free elections in the near future."

This indicates a very complex situation. Syrians want free elections, but they prefer to have Assad stay in power to organize them. This being the case, the Russian diplomatic efforts to try to urge the Assad regime to speed up its reforms appear to be roughly in harmony with Syrian public opinion.

While the Russians are urging President Assad to speed up reforms, the West is ordering him to stop the violence (that is, order his armed forces to give up) and resign. Neither of these exhortations is likely to be obeyed. The Russians would almost certainly like to stop the escalation of violence, for their own good reasons, but that does not mean they have the power to do so. Their attempts to broker a compromise, decried and sabotaged by Western support to the opposition, merely put them in line to be blamed for the bloodshed they want to avoid. In a deepening civil war situation, the regime, any regime, is most likely to figure it has to restore order before doing anything else. And restoring order, under these circumstances, means more violence, not less.

The order to "stop killing your own people" implies a situation in which the dictator, like an ogre in a fairy tale, is busily devouring passive innocents. He should stop, and then all the people would peacefully go about their business while awaiting the free elections that will bring the blessings of harmony and human rights. In reality, if the armed forces withdraw from areas where there are armed rebels, that means turning those areas over to the rebels.

And who are these rebels? We simply do not know. Someone who may know better than we do is Osama bin Laden's successor as head of al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is seen on a video urging Muslims in Turkey and neighboring Arab states to back the Syrian rebels.

With uncontrolled armed groups fighting for control, the insistent Western demand that "Assad must step down" is not really even a call for "regime change". It is a call for regime self-destruction.

As in Libya, the country would de facto be turned over to rival armed groups, with those groups that are being armed covertly by NATO via Turkey and Qatar having an advantage in hardware. However, the likely result would be a multi-sided civil war much more horrific than the chaos in Libya, thanks to the country's multiple religious differences. But for the West, however chaotic, regime self-destruction would have the immediate advantage of depriving Iran of its potential ally on the eve of an Israeli attack. With both Iraq and Syria neutralized by internal religious conflict, the strangulation of Iran would be that much easier – or so the Western strategists obviously assume.

At least initially, the drive to destroy the Assad regime relies on subversion rather than outright military attack as in Libya. A combination of drastic economic sanctions and

support to armed rebels, including fighters from outside, notably Libya (whoever they are), reportedly already helped by special forces from the UK and Qatar, is expected to so weaken the country that the Assad regime will collapse. But a third weapon in this assault is propaganda, carried on by the mainstream media, by now accustomed to reporting events according to the pattern: evil dictator killing his own people. Some of the propaganda must be true, some of it is false, but all of it is selective. The victims are all victims of the regime, never of the rebels. The many Syrians who fear the rebels more than the present government are of course ignored by the mainstream media, although their protests can be found on the internet. A particular oddity of this Syrian crisis is the way the West, so proud of its "Judeo-Christian" heritage, is actively favoring the total elimination of the ancient Christian communities in the Middle East. The cries of protest that Syrian Christians rely for protection on the secular government of Assad, in which Christians participate, and that they and other minorities such as the Alawites may be forced to flee if the West gets its way, fall on deaf ears.

The story line of dictators killing their own people is intended primarily to justify harsh Western measures against Syria. As in Bosnia, the media are arousing public indignation to force the US government to do what it is in fact already doing: arm Muslim rebels, all in the name of "protecting civilians".

Last December, US National Security Advisor Tom Donilon said that the "end of the Assad regime would constitute Iran's greatest setback in the region yet - a strategic blow that will further shift the balance of power in the region against Iran". The "protection of civilians" is not the only concern on the minds of US officials. They do think of such things as the balance of power, in between their prayer breakfasts and human rights speeches. However, concern with the balance of power is a luxury denied less virtuous powers such as Russia and China. Surely the shift in the balance of power in the region cannot be limited to a single country, Iran. It is meant to increase the power of Israel, of course, but also the United States and NATO. And to decrease the influence of Russia. Thrusting Syria into helpless chaos is part of the war against Iran, but it is also implicitly part of a drive to reduce the influence of Russia and, eventually, China. In short, the current campaign against Syria, is clearly in preparation for an eventual future war against Iran, but also, obscurely, a form of long term aggression against Russia and China.

The recent Russian and Chinese veto in the Security Council was a polite attempt to put a brake on this process. The cause of the veto was the determination of the West to push through a resolution that would have demanded withdrawal of Syrian government forces from contested areas without taking into consideration the presence of armed rebel groups poised to take over. Where the Western resolution called on the Assad regime to "withdraw all Syrian military and armed forces from cities and towns, and return them to their original home barracks", the Russians wished to add: "in conjunction with the end of attacks by armed groups against State institutions and quarters and towns." The purpose was to prevent armed groups from taking advantage of the vacuum to occupy evacuated areas (as had happened in similar circumstances in Yugoslavia during the 1990s). Western refusal to rein in armed rebels was followed by the Russian and Chinese veto on February 4.

The veto unleashed a torrent of insults from the Western self-styled "humanitarians". In an obvious attempt to foster division between the two recalcitrant powers, US spokespersons stressed that the main villain was Russia, guilty of friendship with the Assad regime.

Russia is currently the target of an extraordinary propaganda campaign centered on demonizing Vladimir Putin as he faces an lively campaign for election as President. A prominent New York Times columnist attributed Russian support to Syria to an alleged similarity between Putin and Assad. As we saw in Yugoslavia, a leader elected in free multi-party elections is a “dictator” when his policies displease the West. The pathetically alcoholic Yeltsin was a Western favorite despite shooting at his parliament. The reason was obvious: he was weak and easily manipulated. The reason the West hates Putin is equally and symmetrically obvious: he seems determined to defend his country’s interests against Western pressure.

The European Union has become the lapdog of the United States. This week the European Union is continuing to impoverish the Greek people in order to squeeze out money, among other things, lent by German and French banks to pay for expensive modern weaponry sold to Greece by Germany and France. Democracy in Europe is being undermined by subservience to a dogmatic monetary policy. Unemployment and poverty threaten to destabilize more and more member states. But what is the topic of the European Parliament’s main monthly political debate this week? “The situation in Russia.” One can count on orators in Strasbourg to lecture the Russians on “democracy”.

American pundits and cartoonists have totally interiorized their double standards, so that Russia’s comparatively modest arms deliveries to Syria can be denounced as cynical support to dictatorship, whereas gigantic US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are never seen as relevant to the autocratic nature of those regimes (at most they may be criticized on the totally fictitious grounds of being a threat to Israel). To be “democratic”, Russia is supposed to cooperate in its own subservience to Washington, as the United States pursues construction of a missile shield which would theoretically give it a first-strike nuclear capability against Russia, arms Georgia for a return war against Russia over South Ossetia, and continues to encircle Russia with military bases and hostile alliances.

Western politicians and media are not yet fighting World War III, but they are talking themselves into it. And their actions speak even louder than words... notably to those who are able to understand where those actions are leading. Such as the Russians. The West’s collective delusion of grandeur, the illusion of the power to “make reality”, has a momentum that is leading the world toward major catastrophe. And what can stop it?

A meteor from outer space, perhaps?

Diana Johnstone is the author of *Fools Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions*.

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