

UN shenanigans on Syria

By Aisling Byrne

"Viscous nasty business" ... "aggressive pressure ... by US diplomats", "ferocious pressure on weaker non-permanent members", the "type of pressure [that] is very, very difficult for weaker countries ... to resist."

That's how a former British diplomat at the United Nations, Carne Ross, described last September's UN showdown over the Palestinian Authority's bid for recognition for statehood. [1] "This is how power works." he said.

He might have added "money", for route to the UN Security Council in the case of Syria this week has been one of bullying, bribery, unprecedented procedural violations at the Arab League, along with media manipulation and significant distortions of reality.

At stake in this diplomatic battle of "historic importance" is the campaign led by the United States, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and France to secure a UN mandate for external interference in Syria with the aim of deposing President Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

The UN face-off comprises two draft resolutions - a "battle royal" with "all the trappings of a cold war", writes the seasoned diplomat, M K Bhadrakumar. [2] Despite claims to the contrary, the US/UK/France/Gulf Cooperation Council draft resolution [3] would essentially allow for a phased process of regime change.

Far from presenting the findings from the Arab League's monitors report, that report has been effectively shelved in presentations by Arab League secretary general Nabil al-Arabi and Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani, the Qatari foreign minister. Why? Because the report effectively supported many of Syria's positions, and acknowledged that Syria had met nearly all the requirements as set out by the Arab League.

According to the draft, Assad is required to leave office in favor of his deputy, who would oversee a national unity government leading to presidential and parliamentary elections. The UN secretary general, "in consultation with the League of Arab States", would report on developments every 15 days. Significantly, "further measures" would be taken in the event of Syria non-compliance.

A British official speaking anonymously told the Associated Press that while "the text would stress there are no plans for any military intervention in Syria - though the option would not be explicitly, or permanently, ruled out". [4]

The January 30 statement from the US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, makes much of the absence of sanctions, and although it is true that the draft resolution [5] does not explicitly call for sanctions, in an implicit way it precisely calls for them: point 13 of the draft resolution "takes note of the measures imposed by the League of Arab States on the Syrian authorities on 27 November 2011, and encourages all [UN] States to adopt similar steps" (on November 27 last year, the Arab League halted transactions with Syria's central bank, froze Syrian assets in other Arab states and Arab investment in Syria and imposed a travel ban on senior Syrian officials). [6]

As foreign ministers arrive for the showdown, attempts are being made to circumscribe discussion through limiting it solely to the proposals from the Arab League Secretary General al-Arabi and al-Thani whose explicit agenda is regime change. German ambassador Peter Wittig clarified last week: "We want to be reflecting what the Arab League wants ... we don't want to put ourselves in the driver's seat, that is the role of the Arab League." [7]

January's out-going chair of the Security Council, Baso Sangqu of South Africa, laconically noted the need to meticulously follow the Arab League's position on Syria, while in the case of Libya, the SC pointedly ignored the African Union's position and proposals. "Each case is different," replied Wittig.

Despite attempts to circumscribe debate, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov insists that the full Arab League monitors' report be tabled. According to Ria Novosti, apparently "some of the report's information was missing" in the document that Arab League foreign ministers submitted to the UN Security Council. Of course, we'll hear their proposals but we would like to see the report itself," Lavrov said. [8]

Lavrov is wise to ask for the full contents to be discussed (the full report is available online here), because the Saudi claim that "the Syrian government did not execute any of the elements" is plainly untrue. The initial one-month mission of the Arab League observers had four clear aims: to protect citizens, cease acts of violence, release detainees and withdraw all military presence from cities and towns. This should then lead to dialogue between the government and the opposition, and the launching of a parallel political process.

In terms of stopping acts of violence, the report states its presence created a "considerable calming of the situation and restraint on the part of those forces". The Mission did "determine an unarmed entity that is not mentioned in the protocol" and called for "all sides to cease all acts of violence".

The presence of armed opposition groups involved in the conflict and armed smuggling is now acknowledged in the new US/UK/France/GCC draft resolution (paragraph 8). In relation to detainees, the report notes 5,152 detainees released, and confirmed that "all military vehicles, tanks and heavy weapons had been withdrawn from all cities and residential neighborhoods". It concluded that essentially the mission had enjoyed the co-operation of the Syrian government.

The report noted its short 23-day mandate found that "many parties falsely reported explosions or violence" which were unfounded; also referring to "media exaggeration" in the "nature of incidents and the number of persons killed in incidents". The mission noted it had also been the "target of a vicious media campaign" including publication of statements falsely attributed to the mission's director; and concluded that there needed to be a "commitment of all sides to cease acts of violence, thereby allowing the Mission to complete its tasks and, ultimately, to lay the ground for the political process ... a process [that] must be accelerated and a national dialogue launched ... in order to create an environment of confidence that would contribute to the mission's success". This last recommendation is precisely what is by-passed in the Western-sponsored resolution.

Senior political sources have confirmed that last September, Qatar "bought" the president's position of the Arab League from the Palestinians in return for a donation of US\$400 million in "aid" to PA President Mahmoud Abbas who at the time was "prioritizing" payment of salaries to employees - it was Palestine's turn to hold the rotating Arab League President's position. [9]

The presidency - along with its position as chair of the League's Syria committee - gave Qatar the opportunity to pursue Assad's fall. However, all this may change in March with Iraq's assumption of the six-monthly presidency.

With Qatar at the helm, the Western plan was to set criteria for Arab League monitoring designed to provoke a Syrian refusal. A senior Arab League official speaking off-the-record in December said that the league's Syria initiative was steered away from its original form by "some of the ministers who didn't like the direction and started dictating certain ideas that they knew Syria would not accept".

"The "Protocol" to create a League observer delegation was forwarded with an "ultimatum" in a short time, which we have never experienced in the history of diplomacy at the Arab League ... This is needed not only for Syria - why not a plan for everywhere in the region?". "The whole process was meant to gain a refusal, to move to the second stage of this game," said the official. [10]

So it is not surprising that despite the ministerial committee of the Arab League voting four to one (Qatar) for an extension of the mission by one month, this was overruled: Saudi Arabia withdrew its monitors, followed swiftly by the remaining Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Arab League secretary general al-Arabi reportedly decided unilaterally to suspend the mission, ostensibly because the observers faced increasing security risks, particularly in wake of a fatwa issued by the spiritual leader of the Syrian Salafists, Sheikh Adnan al-Arouri, who announced on al-Arabiya that it was lawful to kill the observers.

Paradoxically, the very success of the observer mission has been used by the West as further propaganda in favor of Security Council action. The withdrawal of Syrian security forces from cities and towns, as required by the observers, has been used to present a false picture of the opposition 'seizing' control of parts of Syria from the army - the presence of a few armed insurgents or insurgent-manned roadblocks does not constitute control.

Take the case of al-Zabadani, for example. Reports claim that a ceasefire was agreed with the Syrian army on January 17 and that armed opposition elements took control the following day. The Israeli intelligence website Debka on January 27 warned against giving regard to such inaccurate reporting:

This week, Arab and Western media called the Zabadani battle the first rebel important victory, claiming they had liberated the town. Tariq Alhomayed, editor-in-chief of the influential Saudi A-Sharq al-Awsat, wrote Monday, January 23: "Today the Syrian revolutionaries are pursuing a strategy that seems smart and effective so far, namely the search for a Syrian Benghazi or, as a source close to what is happening on the ground in Syria told me, ... 'multiple Benghazis, not just one.' These could be Homs, Zabadani, and others, which the rebels consider to be liberated cities." ... There is only one problem with these glad tidings: They never happened. Neither Zabadani nor Homs have become "Syrian Benghazis" or liberated cities.

What really happened was that on January 18, local Zabadani town leaders, fearing their town was in for a heavy military bombardment, struck a deal with the Syrian army: They won a ceasefire conditional on their expelling all armed rebels and their weapons from the town ... the dismantling of all barricades and

military posts; and the disappearance of armed men who had been roaming their streets. For those concessions, the Syrian army agreed to halt its attacks on Zabadani and pull back several hundred meters from its outskirts.

Some of the rosy opposition propaganda making the rounds has begun trickling into Western intelligence evaluations - in Washington too. It is infecting accounts whose factual accuracy is relied upon as the bedrock for policy decisions on Syria. In actual fact, the FSA [Free Syria Army] has no hideouts around Damascus; nor did the rebels seize Douma. As we write this, Assad and his forces are in full control of Damascus. Therefore, Western intelligence assessments claiming the Free Syrian Army, while not yet a direct threat to the regime, is increasingly influencing the course of the struggle as the engine of processes that will eventually topple the regime, are premature at best and made of whole cloth at worst. [11]

Pro-regime change commentators argue that "Syria looks more like Libya every day". [12] If it does, it is because the mainstream narrative on Syria is intentionally constructed to be so - in order to justify the call for external intervention. But this doesn't mean it is necessarily correct.

As British TV Channel Four's diplomatic editor wrote last week in relation to Youtube footage showing purported captured Iranian snipers, Revolutionary Guards, no less, confessing, most probably after being tortured, to shooting civilians in Syria: "[this] goes to show how careful we have to be before airing footage we didn't shoot ourselves, and how cruel and dirty this conflict has become." [13]

The extraordinary act of war by Qatar and Saudi Arabia in agreeing to supply weapons to armed insurgents in a fellow Arab state in any other situation would be called state-sponsored terrorism, particularly given that there is evidence that a majority of Syrians do support Assad. Commenting on a series of recent Facebook polls, and having taken into account the limitations of such polls, even some with between 180,000 to 1 million respondents, Syrian analyst, Camille Oktraji concludes:

[I]n addition to the majority support Assad enjoys, the even larger majority that voted against al-Jazeera, Turkish military intervention in Syria, an Arab boycott of Syria, changing the colors of the Syrian flag or against a UN vote targeting Syria, should be construed by policy makers in Washington and "the international community" that they are interfering on the side of a minority of Syrians and against the wishes of a clear majority. [14]

Under cover of this pretense that the insurgents are gaining control, rather than that Syria has effectively complied with its monitoring obligations, the US, UK, France and their GCC colleagues are trying to bulldoze the Security Council with a resolution intended to ratchet the process towards regime change. Whether they will succeed or not, remains to be seen. Russia continues to insist that it will not support any resolution that facilitates regime change - it wants a Syrian-led political process, not "an Arab League-imposed outcome" or Libyan-style "regime change". Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Gennagy Gatilov said yesterday: "The Western draft Security Council resolution on Syria will not lead to a search for compromise ... Pushing it is a path to civil war."

Russia and its allies' determination may win the day: "There's no longer any expectation inside the [US] administration", reports Foreign Policy, "that Moscow will support international action aimed at removing Assad from power, even by non-military means. But the UN confrontation is meant to isolate Russia diplomatically and make it clear that the Arab League and its Western friends have exhausted all diplomatic options before moving to directly aid the internal opposition, if that decision is ultimately made."

And so the show(down) goes on.

Notes

1. Palestine/UN - quick update: showdown at the Security Council less likely, Carne Ross blog, Sep 22, 2011.
2. American Islam on march in Middle East, Indian Punchline, Jan 27, 2012.
3. See document here
4. European ministers seek UN resolution on Syria, Associated Press, Jan 30, 2012.
5. Syria: Arab League Secretary-General, Qatari Prime Minister to Brief Security Council as Members Grapple with Recent Draft Resolution, International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, Jan 31, 2012.
6. Syria defiant as Arab League votes for financial sanctions, The Guardian, Nov 27, 2011.
7. As France Slips or Spins on "Temporary" Step Down by Assad, Russia Says No, Syria Blames Qatar, US Bases, Inner City Press.

8. Russia Calls for Larger Number of Observers in Syria, Rianovosti, Jan 29, 2012.
9. Palestine to Chair Next Arab League Session, Palestine News & Info Agency, Aug 18, 2011.
10. Dubious Dealings: Syria and the Arab League, Alakhbar, Dec 5, 2011.
11. Regime Change in Damascus? Only If Tehran Wills it, Debka File.
12. Syria looks more like Libya every day, The Daily Star, Jan 21, 2012. 13. Analyzing the largest Syria crisis Facebook polls, CreativeSyria.com: The Syria Page, Jan 24, 2012.
14. Clinton heads to the U.N. for confrontation on Syria, Foreign Policy, Jan 31, 2012.

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