

# HOW A MEDDLESOME AND SHORT-SIGHTED WESTERN FOREIGN POLICY HELPED REDUCE SYRIA TO RUBBLE

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At the time of the Arab Spring 2011 Syria appeared to be on a similar path to other Arab nations, where people were bravely rebelling against their tyrannical ruling elites while asking for more representative government. However, as the protests turned to a full rebellion in Syria, and Bashar Al-Assad's military officers began defecting against him, it also came the swift and predictable condemnations for Assad from western humanitarian interventionists. Both former secretary of state Hilary Clinton and Britain's foreign minister William Hague denounced Assad as no longer the legitimate leader of Syria and a war criminal. Assad responded by calling such condemnations as "provocative" and he turned out to be right. Within days of the denouncement more of Assad's military defected to the Free Syrian Army, igniting a civil war. Next the Russians were to be the targets of western condemnation as Mrs. Clinton chastised them for not supporting the pro-democracy movement in Syria and continuing to provide weapons to Assad.

All the while no one thought to ask Mrs. Clinton why she expected the Russian government to support democracy in Syria? Or why anyone in their right mind does not expect Russia to pursue its own interests in the region? Or perhaps did she believe that strong condemnations from a western diplomat is all that is needed to make dictators shake in their boots and step down from power? The short-sighted moralizing had predictable consequences for Syria, making the rebels bolder in their opposition, and forcing Assad into a corner. From his position he did what any dictator knows how to do - unleashing his own much better equipped and trained military's repressive and destructive power.

In late 2011 and early 2012 Britain, France and the United States declared the Syrian National Council as the legitimate voice of the Syrian people. This new proclamation seemed to give no regard to the possibility that Assad might crush the rebellion someday, remain in control in Syria and assume a more hostile stance towards the west than before. Within days of the proclamation large numbers of Syrian military units defected to the FSA, further escalating the violence. Not just content with providing the FSA moral support through its rhetoric, the west armed, provided non-lethal aid and safe haven in Turkey to the FSA. The FSA grew in number and using weaponry and aid provided by the west, launched full scale attacks on cities around Syria. Increasingly cornered and desperate, Assad also unleashed full scale artillery strikes across the country against the western backed FSA. Unlike in Libya, where air cover from NATO forces ensured Gaddafi's quick defeat and an end to widespread bloodshed, providing only small

arms and “non-lethal” aid ensured a prolonged war of attrition in Syria that has claimed the lives over a hundred thousand people.

In the face of escalating violence and the use of chemical weapons, a lack of a clear strategy in Syria has also invited al-Qaeda to infiltrate country in large numbers. Lessons that should have been learned from Iraq, were swiftly forgotten in Washington and London in favor of hollow bluster and political grandstanding. In an attempt to undo some of the damage done to any hope of a swift end to the violence, the west has recently sought to bring the Syrian regime and the Syrian National Council to peace talks in Geneva. However, the seeds of failure of the peace talks were sown long ago when the west nonchalantly declared that it saw Assad as an enemy and no longer the legitimate ruler of Syria, without considering the consequences of their wild rhetoric. Furthermore, a report, which appears to have been quickly put together by a British lawyers on the behest of the the Qatari government, was released a day before the second round of peace talks in Geneva.

The report details alleged large scale abuse and torture by the Syrian government, and the mass murder of 11,000 people. The report was put together with 55,000 pictures of torture and death smuggled out of Syria by a Syrian defector whose job it was to catalog the dead for the Syrian government. However, the report and pictures contain little to no information on who the people in the pictures are, where they were killed or who killed them. Also the British Law firm that was asked by the Qataris to produce the report only began talking to the Syrian defector on Jan 12<sup>th</sup> 2014 and released the report within eight days just before peace talks were to resume, placing the blame squarely on Assad for the atrocities. These bizarre set of circumstances and the report’s credibility aside, the report is likely to further inflame the atmosphere in which peace can be brokered. According to recent reports Secretary of State John Kerry may have admitted in a closed meeting of fifteen senators that the administration’s policy in Syria is failing.

Therefore, Syria has been not only been the victim of its reprehensible dictator, the various rebel groups that include the FSA and al-Qaeda, it also been subjected to western leaders’ penchant for fetishizing foreign conflicts as opportunities to either flex their humanitarian muscles from the political left, or to “bring democracy to the Middle East” from the political right. Both are two sides of the same strategy that have very little basis in logic. In the case of Syria clear political goals were sacrificed in the name of political grandstanding. The hope was that once the rebels defeated Assad the path would be clear for democracy in Syria. However, there was never a guarantee that the rebels would accomplish such a task, especially with no air support from NATO. Furthermore, even if the rebels managed to overwhelm Assad’s army, his replacement would be a group of political exiles and academics in the Syrian National Congress who have little legitimacy in Syria, and would be tasked with creating democracy in a country that has no real democratic tradition or history, and is now overrun by al-Qaeda. This would be an astronomical task, even for the sharpest political mind, and would require years if not decades of stable rule, during which time the country could slink back into authoritarian rule. The only real hope for a peace in Syria was for one side to win the war decisively, which would have been likely if Assad had been allowed to crush the rebels back in 2011 or the rebels had

been provided enough support to depose Assad quickly. If western diplomats hoped for democracy in Syria, it did not reflect in their half backed aid strategy and political provocations that were just enough to cultivate and prolong a civil war, rather than end it decisively. Putting an end to the violence and hoping to create democracy in Syria on the cheap are two logically opposing positions that appear to have eluded western foreign policy makers.

Therefore, there is no longer a clear strategy for Syria that would allow for western diplomats a triumph in brokering a peace between the FSA, SNC and Assad. According to recent reports Assad's forces have been gaining ground in and around Damascus as rebel forces have been pushed back. After slowly pouring gasoline on the fire in the name of humanitarianism and democracy, while simultaneously condemning the violence they sponsored for the last year, western diplomats' hopes of a peace is unlikely, especially when Assad may increasingly negotiate from a more powerful position. Since the FSA is no longer the only group fighting for power in Syria, victory for any one group, whether it's the FSA, Assad or al-Qaeda, will not spell peace. The remaining groups are likely to continue fighting. This is no doubt bad news for the Syrian people who have suffered immeasurably as the so called international community has horribly bungled any hope for an end to the war.