

COMMENTARY

No.134

Wednesday, 7 August 2013

Contrasting Strategies, Same Results

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Whereas former President Bush and President Obama are ideologically a world apart, their policies toward Middle Eastern conflicts produced the same damning reaction. Bush's misguided war in Iraq and its consequences, and Obama's diffidence toward the slaughter in Syria and his excessively misplaced caution over US involvement in another Arab country, evoked similar waves of criticism and resentment from the Arab world toward the US.

This is not to suggest that Obama should have been quick on the draw and engaged Assad's forces directly at the onset of the violent eruption. Yet bearing witness to the unfolding tragedy and the slaughter of more than 100,000 men, women, and children, and five million Syrians becoming refugees or internally displaced, is simply unconscionable.

This also flies in the face of Obama's moral and political principles that he has frequently preached while dangerously eroding America's credibility in the eyes of its friends and foes alike.

Having inherited the disastrous effects of the Iraq war both domestically and in the region, it is only natural for President Obama to be extremely cautious before engaging in another violent conflict, albeit without needing any boots on the ground, especially against another Arab country.

But we must distinguish between the misguided Iraq war and the indiscriminately gruesome killings of Syrian civilians by a ruthless dictator and his criminal gangs.

The Iraq war should be instructive and we must avoid such misadventures in the future. But as the global leader, America cannot shirk its responsibility when gross crimes against humanity are committed in Syria and be paralyzed to act because of the Iraq experience.

The President's decision to finally provide the rebels with certain light weapons, which came in the wake of proving that Assad used chemical weapons against his own people, will change little in the eyes of our allies and enemies alike.

Their perception of Obama's indecisiveness and lack of leadership has already been formed and the damage to his credibility will linger for the remainder of his second term.

Our allies in the Gulf, Jordan, and other Arab states have expressed serious concerns about the US' real commitment to their national security. Top officials, the academic community and multitudes of ordinary people in the region are perplexed about Obama's unseemly behaviour.

They see the glaring contradiction between his lofty speeches about freedom and democracy and his abandonment of these principles when they are perceived to be inconsistent with America's national interests.

Iran has been carefully studying Obama's inaction and vacillation and has concluded that it can openly support Assad by providing him with lethal weapons, material, advisers, and money and encourage volunteers to join the fighting and do so with impunity.

Under these circumstances, how seriously will Tehran take Obama's threats to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons when his fickleness, from their perspective, is on display?

The fact that he rejected the advice of his entire national security team, toward the end of his first term, to provide the rebels with the type of weapons that could turn the tide in their favour only further encouraged Tehran to directly interfere without fear of US reprisal.

Would Hezbollah have sent thousands of its best fighters to battle alongside Assad's forces against the rebels if they believed there would be serious consequences for their direct involvement, resulting in far more serious losses?

Would Iraq have continued to allow flights of Iranian aircrafts over its territory, sending thousands of tons of military equipment, munitions, and other essential supplies to keep Assad's forces fully equipped to fight "till victory?"

Sensing a lack of resolve and unprincipled leadership, Russian President Putin was more than eager to challenge the US on its own turf while anticipating a feeble reaction at best.

Otherwise, would Russia continue to provide Assad with the most sophisticated military hardware, presumably “under old contracts,” in the height of the fighting while hypocritically demanding that no weapons should be supplied to the rebels and no outside power should interfere in Syria’s internal conflict?

Many Israelis also wonder whether President Obama will indeed take military action, as he pledged to in order to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, or settle for containment once Tehran reaches the point of no return (i.e. the ability to assemble nuclear weapons in short order).

As the Israelis survey the deteriorating situation in Syria and the US’ reaction, will they entrust their national security to a President whose actions thus far have not matched his rhetoric?

Why would America’s allies take for granted the administration’s word when “red lines” are crossed, for example in connection with the use of chemical weapons by Assad against civilians? Ironically, the exhaustive investigation that followed, presumably to ascertain the actual use of chemical weapons was superfluous because the administration has already established the fact of their use a few weeks earlier.

It is one thing to deny the rebels the weapons needed if there was an American strategy in place that would lead to a specific desirable outcome. Sadly, however, that was not the case.

The administration has repeatedly predicted that Assad’s days are numbered, but there was no framework in place not only on how to aid the rebels to accelerate Assad’s ouster, but what role the US could play to shape the new political order that would emerge post-Assad.

Twice before, major efforts were made to find a political solution supported by the US, the UN, the Arab League, and even Russia. Two distinguished diplomats, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and former Foreign Minister of Algeria Lakhdar Brahimi, were assigned to the task, and twice their tireless efforts failed.

What makes the US believe that another such effort will, at this juncture, succeed when the death toll in Syria continues to mount, the country is systematically destroyed, and the stakes for Assad and the rebels are becoming higher? Neither side could conceive of a political solution that of necessity requires full cooperation between them.

Having lost so much ground in recent days, the rebels justifiably are refusing to enter negotiations in the search for a political solution from a position of weakness.

Conversely, by making significant gains with the full support of Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, Assad has no incentive to negotiate in earnest as long as he believes he can now crush the rebellion and maintain his grip on power.

The highly anticipated meeting of the G8 in Northern Ireland has yielded nothing more than the same empty rhetoric. Notwithstanding the prior agreement between Russia and the US to convene a conference of all the concerned parties to find a political solution, no date has yet been established. And if the conference ever convenes, it will more than likely meet the same fate as previous efforts.

Meanwhile, Syria is disintegrating along sectarian lines and every day that passes makes it ever more difficult to piece it together.

Syria has become the battleground between Sunnis and Shiites, between Russia and the US, and may well engulf (in one form or another) its neighbouring countries, namely Israel, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.

Being that Syria was ripe for a rebellion against a heartless regime run by the Assad family for more than four decades, one cannot place the entire blame on the US.

That said, the lack of US leadership and resolve to stem the conflict at the onset offered America's enemies a golden opportunity to exploit the conflict to their advantage while leaving America's allies anxious about the future. Sadly, even America's Western allies no longer feel obliged to follow the US' lead, and Obama's ability to reach a consensus has become limited.

Bush's brazen and misguided Iraq war, which handed the country on a golden platter to Iran and allowed it to consolidate its regional influence exponentially, is akin to Obama's reluctance to aid the Syrian rebels militarily and in a timely fashion.

Both Presidents have by their own action strengthened America's enemies and made its allies increasingly vulnerable to current and future national security concerns.

Syria is on the verge of disintegration, but perhaps there still time for Obama to try to turn the tide and rescue the Syrian people from Assad's killing machine while redeeming America's credibility, which remains central to the region's security and future stability.

Now that the President has agreed to provide the rebels with arms, it should not be done piecemeal but urgently and with the required quantity, including critical weapons such as anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles. This could quickly change the fighting dynamic on the ground in favour of the rebels and deny Assad any hope of prevailing.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/contrasting-strategies-same-results/>

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