

Syria: International Norms Have No Teeth without the US
Posted On:December 31, 1969

We are starting to learn from our wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya that we can remove a bad leader but cannot replace him with good governance. We run into trouble when we do not temper our idealism with pragmatism, knowing when and how much to act in the face of evil. But perhaps we are beginning to be a bit more practical.

Because we love democracy and hate autocracy, we had hoped that the public clamor that got rid of autocrats in Egypt (and before that in Iran) would set those countries on the road to democracy. We admired the hip young professionals who put their bodies on the line in demonstrations. However, we did not see that by far, the majority in those countries were neither hip nor modern; they were ignorant and religious. Iran got an Islamic dictatorship, and Egypt almost did too, to be saved by military intervention, something that we liberals do not like.

Syria is another case in point. The President knows that there are few good choices there. The Assad government is horrible, but the rebels could well be far worse and removing Assad can only result in anarchy and even worse civil war unless we play a smart game. Yes, Obama made the mistake of warning the Assad government that using chemical weapons on his civilian population violates international norms without being ready to follow through. But this is being remedied now.

A global treaty bans any use of chemical or biological weapons. It is, indeed, a norm, but a norm without teeth. There is no way that the world can punish such a violation. In theory, the UN Security Council could order military action (to be provided by volunteer states, such as Nigeria); however, the Security Council will never order action against a human rights violator because two of the five member states, China and Russia, will veto any action that violates national sovereignty.

They vetoed intervention when the Serbs were engaging in genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo; the US-led NATO went in and stopped the genocide. They vetoed intervention when the Sudanese government was slaughtering and enslaving their southern Black population, and committing genocide against fellow Muslims in Darfur province. In these cases, nobody cared enough to do anything but talk about it. China and Russia fear that someday they might be at the receiving end of intervention when they do something horrific. So if any moral case is ever to be made, the United States must lead it. And it is very difficult to get public support for such intervention if it does not affect our own interests.

The Middle East has long been one of our regions of interest---hearkening back to World War II. Oil was the issue, and for the time being, still is. But since our response to the transformation of a modernizing state, Iran, to an Islamist dictatorship in 1979, our ability to control events in that region has declined. The resurgence of Militant Islam began there, and has spread not only to the vast swath of Muslim nations across the world, but has also arrived with radicalized immigrants in Europe and the United States. We have been very slow to recognize that it is not Islam that is our enemy, but its modern form of Islamo-Fascism.

However, as complex as this scenario is, there is one difference from our former struggles with Nazi Germany, Fascist Japan, or Communist Russia: those countries could not only use the weapons of war against us, they could also make them. The Islamo-Fascists, fortunately, cannot do this; they cannot make anything, and only destroy. They will ultimately lose this war when they tire of anarchy. But what do we do about murderous dictators?

International norms against poison gas are meaningless without the United States representing global order. Watching the Foreign Relations Committee hearing, I am pleased to see that the President and Congress actually seem to be striking the right balance this time. We are on the right side of history here, and the world gangsters know it.

680 words

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