

3 October 2013

## Bloody Syria

According to Peter Foot, the contrast between Syria's daily suffering and the inept Western-led response to it will leave many painful legacies. And because the West has no realistic chance of ending the crisis any time soon, it should welcome recent attempts by Russia to end the violence.

By Peter Foot for ISN

Mixed news continues to come out of Syria. It is good [news](#) that arrangements have been agreed for the placing of the country's chemical weapons under international control, bad that the Syrian opposition remains [fragmented](#). The international community also remains divided over how best to confront the Syrian crisis. There are no clear paths, countless missed opportunities and not enough fresh thinking. Indeed, far too much of the debate about Syria has been guided by intra-Western tensions.

### Missing the Point

Perhaps for these reasons, it is somewhat unwise for a European to write about developments *within* Syria at the moment. We know so very little about what is going on. Reporters are not properly talking to Syrians; instead, 24-hour news demands thoughtless, short-term, tactical reports of emergencies, explosions, suicides masquerading as strategic facts supporting supposition and speculation. Caroline Ashton may chair this meeting or that; newspaper and blog centimeters might be filled with opinions, supposedly informed by centuries of European sophistication and experience. Instead, the West needs to learn from people like [Nayef Al-Rodhan](#), a distinguished analyst of not just the Arab Spring but of the problem of global justice, based on the restoration of true dignity for all, putting the Syrian tragedy in its full, Arab and Islamic context.

For Euro-Atlanticists, still drinking from the stagnant oases of post-1945 remembrance, this is a time for modesty and critical self-reflection. First of all, as Syria's future is in the hands of today's great powers, nothing so convincingly illustrates the marginalization of Europe. While the 1916 [Sykes-Picot](#) Agreement continues to enrage, its Franco-British successors are helpless bystanders, nearly a century later – and no longer agree on the region. No wonder the EU External Action Service has turned with relief to the [Iranian nuclear](#) resolution issue: it offers far more hope than EU engagement with Syria.

Second, the Europeans are now collectively so instinctively secular as to rule their governments out of understanding the tensions, passions and incomers to the Syrian situation, still less suggesting solutions. Europe is remote from the growing religious currents apparent across the rest of the world and is no longer much respected as an observer of religious conflict ([contrast](#) the United States). One

does not have to be supportive of the secular Ba'athist regime in Damascus or sympathetic to the religious ideologues with Kalashnikovs to see the point: Europe has abandoned the language of understanding that is most likely to bring Syrian combatants to the peace table. Religious people are simply assumed – in countless editorials, policy discussions and broadcasts – to have missed the European [Enlightenment](#) 'moment', and are therefore condemned to miss the point and suffer 'inevitably' as a consequence.

Missing the point is evident in much of the European discussion on the Syrian crisis. As [Caitlin Moran](#) has made plain, where is the Syrian viewpoint? If bombing was suggested for New York, a city a thousand km further away from most of Europe, we would all know the local, anticipatory reactions. Newspapers in Paris, Berlin and London are either not interested or funded to find out what people in Damascus and the wider Syrian population thinks, feels and senses.

Nor is it surprising that parliamentary debates in Europe about Syria have been parochial in the extreme. The dreadful suffering in Syria, the loss of another generation of Arab young people to hopelessness, is not unappreciated - but nor does it constitute the heart of the political discourse. Even the discussion about the *hiqab* seems to be a vehicle for ignoring wider issues in the region. Overwhelmingly, the coverage in Europe has been the extent to which actions or inactions are good for intra-Western relations, or of those between the US and Russia and/or China. "Syria itself is too complicated for us so let's concentrate on the more simple implications for us" – seems a not-unrealistic summary of our position.

### **Whose Responsibility to Protect?**

That said, the political momentum is interesting. The decision by the UK Parliament not to [support](#) David Cameron's preference for reinforcing the planned bombing mission against Damascus is startling, even in retrospect. That this was followed by similar French and American decisions confirms the point. In each country, the constitutional norm is for the executive to take a decision on security matters, be that what it might be, confident either that parliamentary/congressional support will be forthcoming or it has no procedural role to play. In all cases, clearly, the shadow of the 2003 decision to go to war in Iraq is dark and everywhere obvious – even for France which took a much more principled stand than Washington or London.

Similarly, the evolving conditions in Afghanistan - in which all countries had a role to play - informs public opinion. The collapse of deference, such a feature of European politics for decades, extends now to that most basic element of state power - the 'legitimate' use of violence. In the British case, the determination of legitimacy in such matters has been put to the test; just how sustainable it will remain an interesting question. The House of Commons' frequent, self-regarding boast about being the mother of parliaments is intriguing only in the sense that, maybe, it has now rediscovered its accountability powers. The relative weakness of both the US and French presidents may offer similar opportunities to democratic assemblies in other places.

Whether Syria will directly benefit from greater democratic accountability elsewhere is another question. But it will send an unmistakable message to others who wish to challenge the status quo. The overwhelming likelihood is that the 'moment' of liberal interventionism has passed. Populations of the habitual interventionists will require far more persuading; their elected representatives, having supported reductions in military spending for quite some time, will prudently reinforce non-intervention as the default setting. There are fewer and fewer options. The [Responsibility to Protect](#) idea seems to have had a short life, despite its supporters' protests to the contrary. One can only sympathize with [Lakdar Brahimi](#) - the author of a groundbreaking report about the international community's responsibility to intervene in conditions of domestic intolerability - in his current United Nations role in Damascus. What was justified for the

Balkans is clearly not going to be replicated in the Levant.

### **Here's a Question**

What would Metternich say to Bismarck in such confusing circumstances? The former was the master tactician in keeping continental things the same; the latter, the Å±ber-strategist at disrupting the status quo but without bringing down continental wrath. Certainly, neither the Roman nor Ottoman Empires would have had any qualms at crushing the Syrian revolt. Metternich would have been happy to advise them in the correctness of that instinct – stability at all costs would have been his watchword. Netanyahu's Israel would have been Metternich's ally in this.

Bismarck, on the other hand, would have either immediately toppled or steered clear of Iran's former president, Mr Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but would have probably cultivated links with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Bismarck would obviously have been positively interested in the new Iranian head of government, Hassan Rouhani, as an agent of constructive change and reassuring about international stability. Israel, under Netanyahu, would have worried. Metternich would say, "I don't like any of this". Bismarck might reply, "I think there are possibilities here".

The problem is the fact that Europe's instinct – and that of the international community – is Metternichian. The position taken by Russia and China is redolent of Metternich – sovereignty at all costs, do nothing that limits future nation-state options, keep the lid on. Members of the EU, remarkably, given the compromises that have worked in their area of sovereignty for so long, are unsure of their position. The US-led, nominally anti-Assad position has similar nervousness: it is humanitarian intervention-lite. Avoidance of engagement is its theme; no humiliation at any cost. The absence of a Bismarckian figure is painfully obvious, especially in Washington.

The irony is that Moscow may well have to take on that mantle – that is the logic of the initiatives regarding the control and custody of Syrian chemical weapons. That introduces outside players into the setting, to accomplish something all sides can agree about: even Assad wants this as the price of continued Sino-Russian support. It is not impossible to hope that this could be the beginning of wider talks. The worst thing from an outside perspective would be for us to condemn Russia, following often, instinctive Cold War habits, for meddling. Moscow has leverage; the old West does not. Russia is bidding for leadership where others have no chance – it is, surely, to be encouraged. Syria's wounds are already too serious to be left untreated.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[US Government and Congress Response to Syria](#)

[Possible US Intervention in Syria: Issues for Congress](#)

[The Responsibility to Protect: Ensuring the Norm's Relevance after Libya, Cote d'Ivoire and Syria](#)

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For more information on issues and events that shape our world please visit the ISN's [Dossiers](#) and the [ISN Blog](#).

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