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Why Intervening in Syria is a Crazy Idea

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If I were to follow the call of my heart, I would appeal to our government to send the Israeli army into Syria, drive the Assad gang from Damascus, turn the country over to the Syrian opposition or the UN, and go home.

That wouldn't even be very difficult.

Damascus is just a few dozen kilometers from the positions of the Israeli army on the Golan Heights.

The Syrian army is busy fighting against their own people. If they turn around to fight against us, the insurgents would sweep into Damascus and finish the job themselves.

Either way, the monster would be gone.

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Yes it would, but, alas, it is an altogether crazy idea.

First of all, because the Syrian people, including the insurgents, probably hate us even more than they hate Bashar.

If Israeli soldiers crossed the border, the Syrians would unite behind their army and end the insurrection.

For the entire Arab world, Israel is the devil's disciple. Even the Arab countries which, like Saudi Arabia, assist the Free Syrian Army would have to think twice. Israel's support for any Arab group, progressive and patriotic as it may be, is the kiss of death.

For that reason, even verbal support would be fatal. Some people would like the Israeli government to call upon President Barack Obama and/or the UN to intervene. That would be misguided. It would help Bashar and his cronies to stigmatize the rebels as American agents and Zionist stooges.

So what can Israel do to help the suffering people next door?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Neither military intervention, nor diplomatic efforts, nor even a gesture of solidarity.

Instead, we should meditate on the reasons for our being in this deplorable situation.

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There was a time when people in the Arab world did not like Israel, but believed what Israel said. Even when announcements of the Israeli army were disliked, they were believed. Those days are long gone.

If the Israeli army were to announce that it was entering Syria to rid it of its dictator, and would withdraw immediately after, people would laugh. Israel? Withdraw? Israel entered Lebanon in 1982 to “free an area up to 40 kilometers from the border of Palestinian terrorists”, and it took it 18 years to leave – and that only after losing an intensive guerilla war. Israel occupied the Syrian Golan Heights in 1967 and has shown no intention of ever leaving.

If Israel did anything about the Syrian situation – did anything at all – the whole world would ask itself: What are those Israelis up to now? What are their devious designs?

Who could be so naïve as to expect a country that has an Avigdor Lieberman as Foreign Minister and an Ehud Barak at Defense, not to mention a Binyamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister, to do anything altruistic?

So let's forget about the whole idea.

Yet how can I sit idly by while less than 300 kilometers from my home – closer than Eilat – awful things are happening?

This is not a question for an Israeli only. It is a question for every human being around the world.

Whether Israeli or Norwegian, Brazilian or Pakistani, we – citizens of this world – are sitting before our TV screens and looking with horror at the pictures coming out of Homs and asking ourselves with growing despair: Are we totally impotent? Is the world totally impotent?

70 years ago we accused the world of not lifting a finger when millions of Jews, Roma and others were killed by Einsatzgruppen and in the gas chambers. But that was in the middle of a terrible World War, when the West and the Soviet Union were facing the ruthlessly efficient Nazi military machine, headed by one of history's great tyrants.

Yet here we are today, facing a tin-pot dictator in a little country, who is slaughtering his own people, and still unable to stop it.

This goes far beyond the terrible events in Syria.

The helplessness of the world community, euphemistically called “the family of nations”, to do anything in such a situation cries out to high heaven.

The simple truth is that at the beginning of the third millennium, in the age of economic globalization and the world-wide net of instant communication, the international political system is still lagging centuries behind.

After the terrible First World War, the League of Nations was created. But the hubris of the victors and their vengefulness against the vanquished caused them to set up a faulty structure that broke down at the first real test.

After the even more terrible Second World War, the victors tried to be much more realistic. But the structure they created – the United Nations Organization – has other faults. The Syrian crisis shows them up in the most glaring

light.

The worst feature of the UN is the veto. It regularly condemns the organization to utter impotence.

It is vain to accuse Russia and China of unabashed cynicism. They are no different from other great powers. The US has used the veto far more times, especially to protect Israel. Russia and China serve their perceived short-term interests, and to hell with the victims. Ugly, disgusting, but commonplace. History is full of examples. The Munich agreement and the Hitler-Stalin pact spring readily to mind.

But does the ugly Russian veto against a toothless resolution in the Security Council really serve any real Russian interest? I think that Moscow should know better. Their arms sales to Syria are a minor consideration. So is the Russian naval base in Tarsis. It looks to me more like a conditioned reflex: If something is supported by the USA, it must be bad. After all, Ivan Petrovich Pavlov was a Russian.

Perhaps more important is the Russian and Chinese fear of setting yet another precedent for foreign intervention in internal affairs, such as mass slaughter, tyranny and mini-genocide.

But in the long run, it cannot be in the interest of Russia to barricade itself behind a wall of cynicism. A “decent respect for mankind”, as formulated by Thomas Jefferson seems much more modern than Stalin’s “How many divisions has the Pope?”

By the way, it would be good for Israel to abide by Jefferson’s rule, too.

Bashar Al-Assad is teaching us that what is needed is a total overhaul of the UN charter. It must start with the veto.

The division of power it represents is ridiculously outdated. Why China and not India? Why France and not Germany?

But that is a minor point. The major point is that it is intolerable for one power, or even several, to block the will of mankind. Today, the UN is a veritable Vetostan.

If the veto cannot be done away altogether, as it should, a mechanism must be found to limit it in a sensible way. For example: a 75% majority in the General Assembly, or a unanimous vote of all the non-veto-wielding Security Council members, should be able to override a veto.

In such a case, the UN, under a new type of Secretary General, should be able to call upon the militaries of member states to put an end to crimes against humanity anywhere, making the intervention of organizations like NATO redundant.

No major forces are needed in Syria. Egyptian and Turkish troops, in combination with the Free Syrian Army, should be sufficient.

Hafez Al-Assad, the long-time Syrian dictator, anointed his son Bashar as his heir, after his elder son died in a crash.

The mild-looking eye-doctor was received with relief. He seemed the ideal modernizer, with progressive, perhaps

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even democratic ideas. Now he is proving that in all dictators there lurks a hidden monster.

“Assad” means “lion”. But Bashar is no lion. He is more like a hyena – an animal called in Yiddish “the laughing beast”. There is nothing here to laugh about.

His time is up.

Post-scriptum :

Uri Avnery is an Israeli writer and peace activist with Gush Shalom. He is a contributor to CounterPunch's book The Politics of Anti-Semitism.

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