

"Responsibility to Protect"

If Syria and Egypt have nothing to fear from the President of the United States, what will Iran fear?

by Shoshana Bryen

"What is being done in Homs [Syria] ... is simply appalling and shouldn't be allowed to stand in our world," said British Prime Minister David Cameron in Washington. The British, he said, are cataloguing "[these crimes](#)," and Asad should "always remember that international law has got a long reach and a long memory."

Standing next to Mr. Cameron, President Obama demanded that Bashar al-Asad step down while reassuring him that the U.S. is unlikely actually to do anything about the problem. "The best thing we can do right now is to make sure that the international community continues to unify around the fact that what the Syrian regime is doing is unacceptable."

Really? That's the BEST we can do? Who out there doesn't think what the Syrians are doing is unacceptable? The Russians? They know perfectly well it is morally unacceptable; they just don't care because a larger Russian *interest* is involved. As in Chechnya. As when the French and Germans said they were opposed to the Iraq war for moral reasons while they were taking Oil-for-Food kickbacks from Saddam.

But despite the fact that PM Cameron is "appalled" by things Mr. Obama has called "unacceptable," the President and various American officials have recently offered a host of reasons no one should expect us to do anything about them.

- The U.S. needs "[permission](#)" from the UN and the Arab League, along with NATO agreement (though perhaps not the agreement of Congress)
- It would take [75,000 soldiers](#) to contain Syria's chemical arsenal
- There could be a [civil war](#). [In support of Mr. Obama, the [French government](#) added yesterday that, "If we give arms to a certain faction of the Syrian opposition, we would make a civil war among Christians, Alawites, Sunnis and Shiites."]
- [Al-Qaeda](#) is part of the Syrian opposition
- Russian-supplied Syrian [air defenses](#) are formidable.

Most of those points are debatable (there's already a civil war and no proof of al-Qaeda involvement). All are largely irrelevant if, indeed, there is a responsibility to stop the perpetrators of what, by most accounts, amounts to war crimes. The United States and our British ally have to determine whether R2P (Responsibility to *Protect*) is actually only R2PATF (Responsibility to *Punish after the Fact*).

There is something to be said for the trials of Slobodan Milosevic and Ratko Mladich after the Bosnia war, and the 92 indictments that followed the Rwanda massacres. There is less to commend the indictment of Omar Bashir of Sudan, who remains in charge of Sudan after the depredations in Darfur, Nuba, South Sudan and the Beja people in the east. And there is nothing that helps the victims of any of the above.

The administration should want al-Asad and other despotic leaders – not to mention our friends – to believe that the United States and its allies in the West mean what they say. At the moment, the bad guys, at least, have no reason to.

In the wake of charges against American pro-democracy workers in Egypt and revocation of their exit visas, Congress determined to withhold U.S. aid until the State Department certified that the country was "making progress in basic freedoms and human rights." Although one would be hard-pressed to see progress, *The Washington Post* **reports** that Secretary of State Clinton is close to announcing that she will bypass Congress and hand over \$1.5 billion in mostly military aid.

She will, according to sources in the article, claim "national security" grounds, fearing that continuing to withhold the money will make the military junta and the Muslim Brotherhood even angrier with the U.S. than they already are. That, and most of the money is tied up in existing defense contracts with U.S. firms.

So, U.S. aid no longer serves the goals of U.S. foreign policy may have, it is a) a blackmail payoff against further Egyptian anti-Americanism and b) a "shovel ready" jobs program. Neither shows American backbone.

If Syria and Egypt have nothing to fear from the President of the United States, what will Iranian fear? Still standing with Mr. Cameron, President Obama followed up on his determination not to inconvenience al-Asad with what *The Washington Post* called a "[stern warning](#)" that Tehran "must meet its international obligations or face the consequences."

Yeah, right.