
SO NOW WE KNOW: RUSSIA IS AS POWERLESS IN SYRIA AS THE WEST

-

27.09.2016

SARAH LAIN

RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE ROYAL UNITED SERVICES INSTITUTE

The Telegraph, 26 SEPTEMBER 2016

Americas ambassador accuses Russia of barbarism in Aleppo. Britains envoy, Matthew Rycroft, goes even further, accusing Vladimir Putin of teaming up with the Syrian dictator Bashar Assad to carry out war crimes. This is a rare show of anger aimed directly at one of the worlds major powers at the United Nations. But will it make any difference?

If the past is anything to go by, no. Russias own envoys are masters at deflecting such criticism, particularly over who is to blame for civilian deaths. Moscows UN ambassador, Vitaliy Churkin, suggests that the latest Syrian peace effort has broken down because the West is supplying Islamist militants. America, he says, cant tell the difference between opposition groups and terrorists.

Russias justification for continuing its bombardment of Aleppo during the ceasefire has rested on the lack of clarity over this term between itself and the US.

For example, Syrian forces, backed by Russian air support, recently struck Handarat, a strategically located Palestinian refugee camp outside Aleppo, with banned phosphorus bombs. As a result, this weekend the Syrian army briefly took control, before being pushed back again by rebels.

Russia insisted that the offensive was aimed at regaining control of the camp from terrorists. Most observers say Handarat is broadly controlled by a coalition of fighters known as Jaish al-Fateh, which has not officially been designated a terror group. But it includes militants from the ultra-conservative rebel group Ahrar al-Sham, which Russia thinks should be so designated.

There is a difference, however, between this nit-picking over whether rebel groups should be classified as terrorists and Russias assistance to the Assad regime in targeting residential areas or

hospitals. And it is here that Western outrage with Moscow is particularly acute. Russia seems unwilling, or unable, to control its client, Assad, in Damascus. The reason Syria has become appallingly resistant to peace breaking out is that no single power – not Assad, not Russia, not Islamic State, not Al-Nusra, not Iran, not America or Britain – has the capacity to swing the war on the ground decisively in its favour. It is, therefore, almost inconceivable that anyone can win outright.

And this is why the UK ambassadors outpouring of contempt at the UN is more significant than the usual comments on there being no military solution in Syria. His comments are part of a pattern of rhetoric that directly links Assads behaviour with Russian weakness, as it shows itself unable to control the Syrian dictator. Ash Carter, the US Defence Secretary, expressed this stance most clearly after the recent destruction of a humanitarian aid convoy near Aleppo. The Russians are responsible for this strike whether they conducted it or not, he said, because they took responsibility for the conduct of the Syrians by associating themselves with the Syrian regime.

True, Russia is unlikely to be shamed by such words into limiting its support for Assad. However, Western diplomats in the UN are finally talking the kind of language Russia understands.

Until now, Putins posturing suggested that Russia was supplanting America as the key power in the Middle East. Today, Western diplomats are making it clear that they have seen through that bluster. They should now start identifying specific cases where Russia proves unable to do what it says it can.

Staffan de Mistura, the UN envoy to Syria, thinks there is still a tiny window of opportunity for Russia and the US to broker another ceasefire in the days ahead. Until today, co-operation between the two powers has been on counter-terrorism. This is unlikely to lead to substantial trust-building, given that they have very different concepts of who the terrorists are.

Any renewed co-operation will be based on a better understanding: no one is strong enough to win this war. It is therefore in the interests of both Russia and the US to end it before either suffers a humiliating reverse as events spiral out of control.

That, unfortunately, may be the best the Syrian people can hope for.