

Poor Obama

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POOBAMA. I pity him. Right at the start of his meeting with history, he made The Speech in Cairo. A great speech. An uplifting speech. An edifying speech.

He talked to the educated youth of the Egyptian capital. He spoke about the virtues of democracy, the bright future awaiting a liberal, moderate Muslim world.

Hosni Mubarak was not invited. The hint was that he was an obstacle to the bright new world.

Perhaps the hint was taken. Perhaps the speech sowed the seed of the Arab spring.

Probably Obama was not aware of the possibility that democracy, virtuous democracy, would lead to Islamist rule. He tried to reach out tentatively, tenderly, to the Muslim Brothers after they won the election. But probably at the same time, the CIA was already plotting the military takeover.

So now we are exactly where we were the day before The Speech: ruthless military dictatorship.

Poor Obama.

NOW WE have a similar problem in Syria.

The Arab Spring begat a civil war. More than a hundred thousand people have been killed already, and the number grows with every passing day.

The world stood by, looking on passively. For Jews, it was a reminder of the holocaust, when, according to the lesson every boy and girl learns at school here, *“the world looked on and kept silent.”*

Until a few days ago. Something has happened. A red line has been crossed. Poison gas has been used. Civilized mankind demands action. From whom? From the President of the United States, of course.

Poor Obama.

SOME TIME ago Obama made a speech, another one of Those Speeches, in which he drew a red line: no arms of mass destruction, no poison gas.

Now it seems that this red line has been crossed. Poison gas has been employed.

Who would do such a terrible thing? That bloody tyrant, of course. Bashar al-Assad. Who else?

American public opinion, indeed public opinion throughout the West, demanded action. Obama has spoken, so Obama must act. Otherwise he would confirm the

image he has in many places. The image of a wimp, a weakling, a coward, a talker who is not a doer.

This would hurt his ability to achieve anything even in matters far removed from Damascus—the economy, health care, the climate.

The man has indeed talked himself into a corner. The need to act has become paramount. A politician’s nightmare.

Poor Obama.

HOWEVER, SEVERAL questions raise their heads.

First of all, who says that Assad released the gas?

Pure logic seems to advise against this conclusion. When it happened, a group of UN experts, no nincompoops they, were about to investigate the suspicions of chemical warfare on the ground. Why would a dictator in his right mind provide them with proof of his malfeasance? Even if he thought that the evidence could be eradicated in time, he could not be sure. Sophisticated equipment could tell.

Secondly, what could chemical weapons achieve that ordinary weapons could not? What strategic or even tactical advantage do they offer, that could not be provided by other means?

The argument to disprove this logic is that Assad is not logical, not normal, just a crazy despot living in a world of his own. But is he? Until now, his behavior has shown him to be tyrannical, cruel, devoid of scruples. But not mad. Rather calculating, cold. And he is surrounded by a group of politicians and generals who have everything to lose, and who seem a singularly cold-blooded lot.

Also, lately the regime seems to winning. Why take a risk?

Yet Obama must decide to attack them on what seems to be very inconclusive evidence. The same Obama who saw through the mendacious evidence produced by George Bush jr. to justify the attack on Iraq, an attack which Obama, to his great credit, objected right from the beginning. Now he is on the other side.

Poor Obama.

AND WHY poison gas? What’s so special, so red-lining about it?

If I am going to be killed, I don’t really care whether it is by bombs, shells, machine guns or gas.

True, there is something sinister about gas. The human mind recoils from something that poisons the air we breathe. Breathing is the most elementary human necessity.

But poison gas is no weapon of mass destruction. It kills like any other weapon. One cannot equate it to the atomic bombs used by America on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Also, it is not a decisive weapon. It did not change the course of World War I, when it was extensively used. Even the Nazis did not see any use for it in World War II—and not only because Adolf Hitler was gassed (and temporarily blinded) by poison gas in World War I.

But, having drawn the line in the Syrian sand for poison gas, Obama could not ignore it.

Poor Obama.

BUT THE main reason for Obama's long hesitation is of quite a different order: he is compelled to act against the real interests of the United States.

Assad may be a terrible son-of-a-bitch, but he serves the US, nevertheless.

For many years the Assad family has supported the status quo in the region. Israel's Syrian border is the quietest border Israel has ever had, in spite of the fact that Israel has annexed territory that indisputably belongs to Syria. True, Assad used Hizbullah to provoke Israel from time to time, but that was not a real threat.

Unlike Mubarak, Assad belongs to a minority sect. Unlike Mubarak, he has behind him a strong and well-organized political party, with an authentic ideology. The nationalist pan-Arabist Ba'ath ("resurrection") party was founded by the Christian Michel Aflaq and his colleagues mainly as a bulwark against the Islamist ideology.

Like the fall of Mubarak, the fall of Assad would most likely lead to an Islamist regime, more radical than the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The Syrian sister-party of the brothers was always more radical and more vio-

lent than the Egyptian mother-movement (perhaps because the Syrian people are by nature of a far more aggressive disposition).

Moreover, it is in the nature of a civil war that the most extreme elements take over, because their fighters are more determined and more self-sacrificing. No amount of foreign aid will prop up the moderate, secular section of the Syrian rebels strongly enough to enable them to take over after Assad. If the Syrian state remains intact, it will be a radical Islamist state. Especially if there are free, democratic elections, as there were in Egypt.

As seen from Washington DC, this would be a disaster. So we have here the curious picture of Obama driven by his own rhetoric to attack Assad, while all his own intelligence agencies work overtime to prevent a victory of the rebels.

As somebody recently wrote: it is in the American interest that the civil war go on forever, without any side winning. To which practically all Israeli political and military leaders would say: Amen.

So, from the US strategic viewpoint, any attack on Assad must be minimal, a mere pinprick that would not endanger the Syrian regime.

As has been noted, love and politics create strange bedfellows. At the moment, a very strange assortment of powers are interested in the survival of the Assad regime: the US, Russia, Iran, Hizbullah and Israel. Yet Obama is being pushed to attack him.

Poor Obama.

TRYING TO understand the mindset of the CIA, I would say that from their point of view, the Egyptian solution is also the best for Syria: topple the dictator and put another dictator in his place.

Military dictatorship for everybody in the Arab region.

Not the solution Barack Obama would have liked to be identified with in the history books.

Poor, poor Obama.