Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Foreign Secretary sets out UK's approach to Syrian crisis

2012-07-20

Sarah Montague, presenter

: The United Nations Security Council meets again today: it'll continue arguing over what to do about Syria. Its members haven't even agreed whether to extend the UN zone observer mission on the ground, whose mandate runs out tonight. But things are moving far more quickly in Syria: rebels have taken control of a number of positions on the borders with Turkey and Iraq - although it's not clear how many they still hold. And they're also trying to take control of parts of the capital Damascus. A short while ago I spoke to the Foreign Secretary, William Hague, and asked whether the United Nations was starting to look irrelevant.

William Hague, Foreign Secretary:

Well, it's not irrelevant, the United Nations can still bring its weight to bear, but, of course, it's failed to shoulder its responsibilities. The Security Council has not shouldered its responsibilities and so it is not doing what it should be doing to try to bring a solution to this - to insist on a transitional government and implementation of the Annan peace plan with a cessation of violence. I think the answer to your question is: we will all be doing more outside the Security Council and intensifying our work to support the Syrian opposition, to give humanitarian aid outside the work of the Security Council.

SM:

What can you do?**

WH**: There are several things we can do. First of all, to give more support, practical support, to the Syrian opposition; we do not give lethal support but I have no doubt that there will be other countries that will give greater lethal support to the Syrian opposition in these circumstances. We've already doubled our humanitarian aid; the flow of refugees coming over the borders - as I saw for myself in Jordan on Tuesday - is rising, perhaps rising exponentially, and so we will do our utmost to help those people.

SM: Just to bring you back on that, on the lethal support point. There have been calls in the United States from people who say, "we should be arming the rebels". If those calls come

from… whether from the United States or from France, could Britain be in a position where it would ever arm rebels in Syria?

WH

: I don’t think so. I don’t rule out any options for the future, because we can’t foresee how it will develop. But it’s never been our policy in any of the conflicts in the Middle East to send lethal assistance to any of the parties involved. I do think, however, that the Syrian opposition are receiving arms - that’s very evident from their ability to make military progress against a powerfully-equipped regime. So that is happening in any case; but that’s not our policy.

SM

: And what are we doing about those… and are you quite happy about that, because… the likes of Saudi Arabia arming the rebels, do you… I mean, do you think that’s entirely acceptable and encourage that?

WH

: We would prefer an arms embargo on everybody in Syria, and that is what we have in the European Union, we enforce that from the European Union. We would be happy to see the United Nations Security Council pass an arms embargo that would forbid not only supplies to the opposition but the continued arming of the regime, which, of course, continues from Russia. So no, we don’t approve of sending arms into Syria. But that is happening - that is my point. And additionally to that, we will work with now more than 100 nations in the Friends of Syria to intensify the pressure on the Assad regime, to isolate them more completely from the rest of the world.

SM

: In what way… how… what pressure can you put on them?

WH

: Well, as you know, in the European Union we’ve passed 16 rounds of sanctions, we have asset-freezes and travel bans on much of the regime, we’ve cut off their exports of oil to the European Union; we now look to some of the nations in the Arab world to take similar measures, which would have a very serious effect on the remaining finances of the Assad regime. So there are many things that we can do, but they all fall well short of passing the resolution that we wanted to pass yesterday.

SM

: OK. What about… can I ask you about today's resolution, because today's resolution is literally about extending a mandate that, in a sense, isn't really working anyway; you've got UN observers there who are meant to be monitoring a ceasefire that doesn't… that isn't in place, and a political process that doesn't exist. Is there any point extending their mandate?

WH

: Well, there is a point of doing it for a final time. What we are proposing, in a resolution we tabled yesterday, which will come to a vote this afternoon, UK time, is a final 30-day rollover of this mission. It is, of course, a mission in great doubt, for all the reasons that you have just given in your question. But I think its actual withdrawal would be seen as another bleak moment in what is happening in Syria, and so we think it's right to give a final opportunity to say, "well, this mission will still be there for 30 days but if there is no political process, or implementation of the Annan plan after 30 days, well, then, let's not pretend that it can achieve anything." So I think it's right to do that, but no more than that - that is why we put the word 'final' in the resolution. Now not everybody on the Security Council agrees with that but we will have that debate there today.

SM

: You say it would be a bleak moment for Syria; would it also be a bleak moment for the United Nations? I wonder how much you think their credibility has been damaged by what we've seen over the last few days.

WH

: It is bleak, yes, it's very disappointing, after a period in which the United Nations Security Council has been able to exert itself successfully in many situations - and is still doing, by the way. If you look at the resolutions we've passed on Yemen and Sudan, and the effect, the positive effect that those resolutions have had in the situation in those and other countries, the United Nations still does, the Security Council still does, a very good job, but in this case it is failing in its responsibilities - and we should not mince words about that. We will, of course, try again.

SM

: OK. And when you do not 'mince words', do you put the blame right on Russia for this and what they've done?

WH

: Yes, I absolutely do so. The Russian argument is that passing a Chapter VII resolution could open the way to a military intervention, Libya-style, in Syria. But there was nothing in our resolution yesterday that could lead to that. It would have required the passing of a further

resolution even to impose sanctions, and what was proposed was under Article 41 of the UN Charter and not related to authorising a military intervention. So I think that was a spurious argument, I think it was wrong for them to take the position they did; China then followed them in that position.

**

SM**: Sure. So why do you think they took the reason… the decision that they did?

WH

: Well, I think that is because they partly feel that we have got our way on quite a wide range of things over the last couple of years; they are concerned about change such as is being brought by the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening, and I think they don't want to see what happened in Syria as another victory of any kind for Western foreign policy. But my answer to that is: this is not the West, this was supported by the Arab League, by countries such as India, as well as by countries like Britain, France and the United States. So we have tried and deployed all of these arguments but Moscow has not been moved on this. I think they will regret it, because I think the situation will now deteriorate further, sharply, and probably to the disadvantage of the Assad regime and to the disadvantage of Russian interests in Syria and the Middle East in the longer term.

SM

: And what about Syria's neighbours, because, as we know, there are some border posts now under control of the rebels. What do you think that could mean for the spread of the conflict?

WH

: Well, I think that there is a danger, of course, of the spread of the conflict, particularly into Lebanon. I don't think the loss of control by the regime of border posts itself creates the conflicts, but it could lead to more fighting in the border areas. So we must be very alert to that - the neighbours certainly are. Our bigger, immediate worry is this flow of refugees - and I saw that for myself in Jordan on Tuesday, and thousands of people per night are now crossing the border, fleeing this desperate situation. I think that means the international community, including the United Kingdom, will have to give greater assistance in the coming weeks to alleviate the plight of those refugees and help the neighbouring countries.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-sets-out-uks-approach-to-syrian-crisis