

SYRIA AND THE UN: Diplomatic Confrontation at the UN regarding The Kofi Annan Syria “Peace Plan”

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Struggle at the UN against Parallel Track to Annan Syria Plan

The Presidency of the General Assembly at the United Nations this year is held by the former Ambassador from Qatar, Nassir Abdulaziz al Nasser. On Thursday, April 5, the President (PGA) held an informal plenary meeting of the General Assembly. Often an informal meeting is called when the meeting will be closed to the press and the public. But in this situation, the spokesperson for the PGA sent journalists email inviting them to the meeting and informing them “Please be advised this will be an OPEN meeting on UNTV and webcast.” (Email to journalists from Nihal Saad, April 4)

The meeting was to hear a report via a live satellite link from Mr Kofi Annan, the UN Envoy for Syria, about the progress of his six point peace plan for Syria. The meeting was called to order and was webcast for journalists and the public.

After Mr. Annan’s live video presentation, the GA President announced that members could speak but should limit their comments to 3 minutes. He then called on the Syrian Ambassador. As the Syrian Ambassador began to speak, the UNTV coverage of the webcast and press access were suddenly ended. This was in violation of the previous announcements to the press that the meeting would be open and available via a webcast.(1)

In response, Ambassador Bashar Ja’afari, the Syrian Ambassador to the UN called a press conference later that afternoon. At the press conference, he said that such action is a serious violation of UN General Assembly procedures and norms and in his estimation an example of “diplomatic and media terrorism”. He pointed to the email that the Spokesperson for the PGA had sent out announcing that the meeting was an OPEN meeting. The Ambassador explained that after the webcast had been turned off and the meeting closed to journalists, only selected speakers were allowed to speak, specifically the Ambassador of Saudi Arabia and the European Union Representative.

The Syrian Ambassador said that multiple requests he made to speak were denied. He also reported that a point of order that the Russian Ambassador asked to be considered was not responded to. Ambassador Ja’afari described how the European Union representative had been granted time to speak before the Russia’s representative, in violation of procedures of the GA requiring that member nations be called on before the EU Representative.

Why would the President of the GA announce that member delegations could speak for 3 minutes and then close the meeting, and deny all but a few chosen members the right to speak?

This is a serious question as the United Nations is the one multilateral organization which includes 193 member states. If the processes of the UN General Assembly are being administered with no regard for customary procedures and traditions, then the integrity of the organization itself is in jeopardy.

During the press conference with the Syrian Ambassador, he was asked for his understanding of why the PGA would be involved with such activity? Ambassador Ja'afari explained that he believed that the PGA was using his position as President of the UN General Assembly to carry out the foreign policy of his government, Qatar, rather than acting to carry out the duties of the presidency as a neutral officer of the UN to facilitate the decisions of the member states.

After Kofi Annan had made his presentation, Syria's Ambassador explained that he had asked to speak because he had wanted to present the Syrian government's official position of support for the Kofi Annan mission. His government, he explained had agreed by a letter sent to Mr. Annan, to pull back troop concentrations and to stop the use and presence of heavy weapons in population centers by April 10.

The action of the President of the General Assembly, however, had objectively functioned to prevent such a public explanation of the position of the Syrian government during the General Assembly meeting.

Syria's Ambassador explained that Mr. Annan had not indicated the receipt of any such official notification from the armed opposition that it would comply with its obligations to honor a cease fire.

"What would happen if the army withdrew from the hotspots and the armed opposition did not give up their fighting?" asked Ambassador Ja'afari.

This is exactly what happened this past January when Arab League observers were withdrawn by the Gulf states after having documented the on-the-ground-presence in Syria of armed insurgents attacking government troops, civilians and the public infrastructure. But in the situation in January, there were Arab League Observers on the ground while the Syrian government was withdrawing its armed forces from population centers, so it could be clear who was breaking the cease fire efforts.

In the case of Mr. Annan's peace proposal, however, there is no such observer force on the ground to monitor the movements toward a cease fire. In addition, the armed insurgents are not being asked to honor a cease fire until 48 hours after the Syrian government has completed the withdrawal of its forces. Ambassador Ja'afari explained that Syria was asking Mr. Annan to provide guarantees that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other nations arming the insurgents would stop their economic, military and logistical support for the armed insurgents fighting against the government of Syria.

The Syrian Ambassador pointed out that on March 25 the Syrian government had officially agreed to Kofi Annan's six point proposal. One week later, on April 1, countries engaged in the illegal intervention in Syria's domestic affairs, had organized a meeting in Istanbul, where they agreed to fund the armed insurgency by providing it with economic, military and logistic support. Instead of providing support for the Annan mission, these countries acted to create a parallel track to undermine the peace process being carried out by Mr. Annan. Providing arms to the insurgents who are fighting to overthrow the Syrian government is

against international law. Ambassador Ja'afari said, "Somebody should stop them."

The UN is being put in a contradictory position. Can the UN help to settle the conflict in Syria, when some of its member nations are financing and arming insurgents to commit violent acts against the government, civilians and the public infrastructure of Syria in violation of the UN charter? If the actions of some members of the UN at its meetings make it impossible to maintain the integrity of the procedures and principles of the UN, the actions of the UN are more likely to intensify the conflict in Syria, rather than helping to resolve it. Such actions will also undermine the very integrity of the UN itself. It was helpful that Ambassador Ja'afari raised these issues in the press conference he held on Thursday, April 5. To challenge the distortions and procedural violations at the UN is an important step toward maintaining the integrity of the UN so it can contribute to resolving conflicts rather than deepening them.

Notes

1. A description of this violation was given later that day by the Syrian Ambassador at a press conference he called. Video of the Press conference by Bashar Ja'afari, April 5, 2012 <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2012/04/press-conference-bashar-jaafari-syria-on-the-situation-in-syria.html>

A helpful written summary for the April 5, 2012 Press Conference by the Permanent Representative of Syria is available at the UN website. http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs//2012/120405_Syria.doc.htm

A version of this article appears on netizenblog at: <http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/04/07/against-parallel-track-to-un-syria-plan>



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