

Is Myanmar the new Syria? Rising violence threatens a repeat tragedy

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As ethnic militias back the popular uprising and refugees flee the country, the similarities with Syria are deeply disturbing



Protesters in Mandalay last week. Myanmar's military junta is waging war on citizens, the UN says. Photograph: Anonymous/AFP/Getty Images

In August 2011, Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's then foreign minister, made a "mercy dash" to Damascus. He appealed in person to Syria's president, [Bashar al-Assad](#), to stop killing his people and talk to his opponents after five months of anti-regime protests.

Davutoglu spoke for Turkey but also, indirectly, for the US and the west. He had conferred with Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, before making the trip. His message: it's not too late to call a halt; the alternative is civil war. But [Assad turned him down flat](#).

At that early point in the crisis, about 2,000 people had died. Fearing worse to come, Davutoglu kept trying. In Istanbul the following year, he urged the US, Britain and other countries to work together to prevent a humanitarian “disaster”.

Millions of **Syrians were at risk, he told me**. “How long can this situation continue? I mean in Bosnia, now we have Ban Ki-moon (then UN secretary-general) apologising 20 years after. Who will apologise for Syria in 20 years’ time?”

Ten years on, Davutoglu has an answer. The **west failed to act decisively**, 500,000 or more Syrians are dead, 13.3 million are displaced, the country is in ruins – and no one has apologised. Meanwhile, half a world away, history repeats itself. Is Myanmar the new Syria?

The portents and parallels are many and disturbing. They foretell yet another avoidable human tragedy of epic dimensions. Once again, those who could stop it don’t. Instead, they wrangle and seek national advantage.

Once again, UN alarm bells ring, warning of an “imminent bloodbath”. Myanmar’s military junta, which seized power in a coup in February, is waging a war on citizens, the special UN envoy Christine Schraner Burgener **told the security council last week**.

Another failure to uphold international law and honour the international community’s “responsibility to protect” could produce “a multi-dimensional catastrophe in the heart of Asia,” she said. But again, as perennially over **Syria**, the council is split.

In Myanmar’s case, it’s China, not Russia, that holds the whip hand. Like Moscow, Beijing plays a double game. Its UN ambassador, Zhang Jun, said China supported stability, dialogue, and what he disingenuously termed the “democratic transition”.

Yet it is **China that is blocking international sanctions** and other UN action to rein in the junta. Like Russia in Syria, **it is a saviour of killers**. No surprise, perhaps. If it’s a choice between autocracy and democracy, the world knows where president Xi Jinping stands.



An image of Myanmar's detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi is projected on to a screen during a night-time demonstration in Yangon in March. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

The US president, Joe Biden, says human rights are a central plank of his foreign policy. But over Myanmar, he looks weak as Beijing calls his bluff. The **UK, the former colonial power, is trying harder**, leading the UN debate, sanctioning military-related sales, and providing funds to record rights abuses.

Meanwhile, Myanmar's neighbours in the Association of South-East Asian Nations make solemn statements and do next to nothing. Taken altogether, it's nowhere near enough. The pressure group Burma Campaign UK demands a global arms embargo, for example, and referral to the international criminal court.

There is little doubt Gen Min Aung Hlaing, the junta boss, and members of the military and police are each day committing crimes against humanity and war crimes. Min Aung Hlaing is **already wanted for the 2017 genocide** of the Rohingya minority.

These uniformed killers and torturers are counting on impunity fuelled by international divisions and inertia. As matters stand, it's entirely possible that, like Assad and most of his henchmen, they will escape justice.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed so far, and thousands detained or forcibly disappeared, according to the UN's human rights office. "Night raids, mass arrests and killings have become daily occurrences," it **reported last week**.

“De facto military authorities have increasingly resorted to heavy weaponry such as rocket-propelled and fragmentation grenades, heavy machine guns, and snipers to kill demonstrators in massive numbers,” it said.

Evidence accumulates that youthful civilian demonstrators are being radicalised by this trauma. Unusually, street protests appear to enjoy **broad middle class support**. There is **talk of taking up arms in self-defence** and building an opposition-based federal army – another echo of Syria in 2011.

Significantly, **Myanmar’s “parallel government”, the CRPH**, comprising MPs elected in last year’s election and supporters of the deposed leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, is now proposing a new federal constitution that recognises the rights of ethnic minorities.

The CRPH’s move makes it more likely that a burgeoning armed opposition will **join forces with battle-hardened ethnic militias**, such as the Karen National Liberation Army, which have long resisted Tatmadaw (army) depredations.

The so-called **Northern Alliance** – the Arakan Army, Kachin Independence Army, Ta’ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – has also strongly condemned the junta’s killing spree.

They vow to defend “the people”. And the Tatmadaw, while claiming to be the only force capable of holding the country together, is pulling it apart. In such incremental ways, as Syrians know, do civil wars begin.

The fact that refugees from the violence are **spilling over the borders** into Thailand and India, just as the Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, is another red light for an international community still struggling with the aftermath of the Syrian exodus.

With the extreme distress and injustice caused by forcible displacement come desperation, hunger, disease, and the spectre of terrorism. We’ve been here before.

It’s true these people are less likely to wash up on Europe’s shores. But that hardly makes this escalating emergency less urgent, humanly, morally and politically. Is the world really prepared to tolerate a second Syria in Asia?

Although Davutoglu’s 2011 mercy dash failed, early intervention remains the best hope of nipping conflict in the bud. How much more horror before we cry “enough”?

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