

The following article, written by Hannah Allam, appeared in McClatchy, Seattle Times, Myrtle Beach Online, One News Page and QWT News on September 26, 2012 at <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/09/26/169777/uns-focus-on-middle-east-eclipses.html>

NEW YORK — Casual observers of this week's United Nations General Assembly could be forgiven for thinking that the Middle East was the only region of concern for world leaders.

The civil war in Syria, Israeli-led anxiety over Iran's nuclear program and anti-American riots in Arab countries are dominating this 67th gathering of heads of state, overshadowing other pressing issues of global importance, say analysts and visiting delegates.

Even when raised by leaders as prominent as President Barack Obama, problems such as human trafficking, climate change or the global financial crisis have barely registered this week. While the General Assembly's official agenda listed more than 160 topics, delegates struggled for an audience if they dared to broach issues not rooted in the perennially troubled Middle East.

"Are there some?" James Paul, the director of the Global Policy Forum, asked with mock incredulity.

Paul, whose organization monitors policymaking at the United Nations, said he'd heard scant mention of the U.S. government's trillion-dollar deficit, the euro crisis or the sense that the world economy was "on the edge." At most, he said, non-Middle East issues arise in sideline meetings, and even then are couched in jargon about "multi-stakeholders' dialogue" and "pro-poor policies."

"The most important things are not coming up here, and that's what's disappointing," Paul said.

Seemingly every bland comment about Syria has become news, but there was little buzz

when the United Kingdom pledged more than \$1.5 million to combat sexual violence in conflict zones.

Or when the Pakistanis announced that the heroin trade had increased by 3,000 percent and was fueling deadly terrorist groups.

Or when the Senegalese sounded alarms over the fact that heavily armed Islamist militant groups now occupy two-thirds of Mali, "sowing despair among the population and destroying symbols of World Cultural Heritage."

The continent of Africa, whose problems take up an estimated 70 percent of the U.N. Security Council's agenda, appears downright neglected when compared with the attention lavished on the Middle East this week. The crisis in Mali, for example, shares some common features with Syria – jihadist haven, refugee exodus – but the United Nations so far hasn't named a special envoy, which would propel that conflict to more prominence.

Syria, meanwhile, is on its second high-profile envoy in 18 months.

"Syria is so visible. It's a real civil war and you have Syrian opposition documenting it and sending it out," said Tiffany Lynch, senior Africa policy analyst at the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**, a bipartisan watchdog commission that makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. "There's really a lack of press coverage on Mali."

"What happens in Africa doesn't get much attention," she added.

African delegates were diplomatic about the U.N.'s focus on their northern neighbors but concerned that there wasn't enough action to help African countries get on track to meet their Millennium Development Goals, eight benchmarks that U.N. member countries are striving to reach by 2015. They include establishing universal primary education, eradicating hunger and empowering women.

“The concentration on the hot spots of the world – mainly the Middle East – is not without reason, and it shows that the U.N. is concerned about world peace,” said Liberian delegate Abu Kamara, who’s served as a diplomat in several Arab countries. “But African countries are lagging far behind the development goals, and these are critical issues that we believe should be highlighted, too, as we talk about the Middle East.”

Reports circulating at the conference seem determined to outdo one another in doom and gloom, as if to shock attendants into looking beyond Middle Eastern borders. More than 100 million people will die by 2030 if there’s no action on climate change, one report warns. Some 900 million people suffer from undernourishment when the world should be able to feed twice its population, according to another.

The tiny South Pacific island of Nauru tried to marshal attention to what it called “a staggering and irrevocable loss of biodiversity and our shared natural heritage.”

“This summer, we were treated to a new round of truly terrifying news: Arctic sea ice dropped to its lowest extent in recorded history, shattering the previous record by a jaw-dropping 18 percent,” Nauru President Sprent Dabwido told the assembly. “Some scientists are predicting that the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free in as little as five years.”

It’s unclear how many leaders heard Nauru’s distressing message; many had filed out after Obama’s address to the assembly Tuesday morning.

The U.S. president, naturally, had focused on the Middle East, eulogizing the slain American ambassador to Libya, defending free speech after Arab riots over an anti-Islam film and reiterating his call for Syrian President Bashar Assad’s ouster.

Those themes were echoed – often with Syria as the only crisis mentioned by name – in the speeches of leaders from countries big and small. Finland lamented “the tragic situation” in Syria, Cyprus condemned the “violence and massacres of innocent civilians in Syria,” Indonesia called it a “human catastrophe” and Qatar ruffled feathers by calling for “all sorts of support” – presumably including weapons – to help the Syrians overthrow Assad.

“As in 2011, the Middle East and Northern Africa continue to be at the center of the attentions of the international community,” Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff said in her speech to the assembly.

Syria has commanded so much attention this week that even the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, an annual topic of contention at the U.N., has been shoved to the background, leaving some delegates feeling like yesterday’s news.

Ambassador Hisham Badr, assistant foreign minister of Egypt, said, “There’s a lot of frustration” with the lack of discussion this week on reviving peace talks. He echoed the wistfulness of his African and Latin American counterparts in describing how Syria is detracting from important dialogue on other topics.

“Yes, of course Syria is very important and should be on the front burner,” Badr said. “But Palestine should not be forgotten, as the mother of all the problems in the region, and any attempts to divert from that are misguided.”

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