



INSS Insight No. 352, July 5, 2012

The End of the Beginning in Syria: The Obstacles to Reaching a Negotiated Settlement

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Following the recent downing of a Turkish reconnaissance jet by Syrian anti-aircraft, the international community, this time through NATO, is once again debating what course of action should be taken with respect to Syria. In the past weeks, the Syrian crisis has become more intense, violent, and regionalized, in turn raising the level of international interest in finding a way to stop the bloodshed and end the crisis.

So far, however, the international community's efforts have fallen short. Diplomatic initiatives by Turkey, the Arab League, and Kofi Annan have all failed to end the civil war. To the contrary, the casualty rate doubled after the Syrian regime ostensibly acceded to the Arab League's peace plan in November. Similarly, the worst atrocities perpetrated since the uprising began occurred after Annan's six-point plan went into force.

These failed attempts to seek a peaceful end to Syria's ghastly bloodshed signal that all efforts to obtain a negotiated resolution to the conflict in the near future are unlikely to succeed. More specifically, given what each side stands to lose should it concede defeat, the possibility of achieving a purely diplomatic solution is extraordinarily dim. This seems to be the case even if Bashar al-Assad would be convinced to go into exile. Instead, the Syrian uprising is most likely to end in one of two ways: either one side will eventually suppress the other entirely, or outside actors will impose an end to the slaughter and oversee a political transition.

Why the Peacemakers have Failed

The regime is still largely cohesive and determined to crush the opposition, despite ongoing defections from the military. Besides the support of most Alawites, the regime has successfully cultivated the support of other minority groups, such as the country's Christians, who have so far largely abstained from the protests. Moreover, beyond simple ethnic politics, the Assad regime secured its rule by devising a complex system based on personal loyalty, privileges, and clientelism. As a result, even a sizable number of Sunnis

who live in the main urban centers like Damascus and Halab support the regime, or benefit greatly from it, and thus stand to lose should the Assad regime collapse.

On the other side is the country's Sunni majority, especially the poor living in the countryside, who for decades have been eager to see an end to the Assad tyranny. Now that the opposition has finally been able to coordinate its protests and come out en masse, it will require extraordinary amounts of force to convince them to end the uprising. They, like their Libyan counterparts, know quite well that if they end the protests, even for a short time, the regime will spare no effort to hunt down its leadership and thwart any attempt to revive the protests later. They realize that if the opposition fails now, it may be decades before another opportunity arises.

The reason diplomacy has thus far failed to achieve a peaceful compromise is not only because both sides are deadlocked and perceive the conflict in similar zero-sum terms, but also because neither side trusts its adversary to live up to its end of any substantive bargain.

At the same time, the Syrian conflict is becoming increasingly regionalized, with foreign powers playing an ever growing role. Iran is strongly backing the Assad regime, while regional Sunni states from the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been supporting and arming the opposition. In turn, this has only added fuel to the internal sectarian fire. In short, Syria has become a proxy battlefield for these two regional powers as they engage in a struggle for influence over the Middle East, just like Lebanon during its long civil war between 1975 and 1990.

Given the extreme polarization of the Syrian society, divided between those who have been holding the reins of the country until today and those who would challenge the current power distribution, it is unlikely that the mere capitulation of Assad would lead the two warring parties to lay down their weapons and agree on a new, mutually satisfying power-sharing formula.

A Way Forward?

With such major inherent impediments undermining trust between the sides, international efforts to end the fighting will have to present both parties with more than just clear carrots and sticks to get them to negotiate and reach a deal. They will have to include some security guarantees to each side.

A first step in the right direction is for the Western international community to convince Assad's backers, like China and Russia, to shift gears and help oust the Syrian President. In turn, this will remove a main obstacle that has kept the Ba'ath regime and the opposition from sitting down and negotiating.

However, removing Assad would just be the first of a series of necessary steps to end the civil war. Even after capitulation by Assad, a successful political resolution of the crisis

will likely need to rely on strong third party involvement to enforce the peace as well as to provide solid guarantees that future ceasefires will not be violated and reprisals will not be allowed.

In other words, for a political resolution of the crisis to succeed in preventing a humanitarian disaster, it will be difficult to avoid substantial third party involvement. NATO may be capable of using airpower alone to remove Assad from power, but the depth of support for the present regime is far greater than the base that sustained Qaddafi. As a result, airpower alone cannot end the bloodshed in the long term. As the Dayton Accords in Bosnia demonstrated, even where airpower is decisive in ending the fighting itself, reaching a binding agreement will require boots on the ground under the guise of NATO or the UN to provide reliable mutual security guarantees.

As NATO is once again discussing the Syrian crisis, it is important for the international community to keep in mind both the precariousness of the current situation and the challenges any direct intervention would face. In particular, given the current polarization of the Syrian population, there should be a clear understanding that removing Assad is a necessary step, but on its own is insufficient to end the bloodshed.

