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SYRIA: TOWARDS A POLITICAL SOLUTION

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SUMMARY

With violence escalating and Bashar al-Assad looking unlikely to be pushed from power soon, it is becoming more urgent than ever to find a political solution in Syria. But it is also increasingly apparent that a political resolution is, at minimum, dependent on Russian acquiescence. Without pressure from Moscow, the regime will neither relent in its use of violence nor enter into a political process. Thus engaging with Russia may be the only way of halting the bloodshed and stopping Syria from falling into a deep and prolonged civil war. The newly appointed UN-Arab League representative to Syria, Kofi Annan, should therefore begin a political process that gives Russia a lead role and includes direct negotiations with the regime despite the horrific nature of its crimes.

An international contact group that includes representatives of Russia, the regime and the opposition, as well Syria's neighbours, should meet in order to set out the parameters for a ceasefire. This should be followed by talks, ideally in Syria, which are not preconditioned on Assad's immediate demise. Europe, for its part, must solidly back Annan's efforts, empowering him to lead a political process that concedes to Russian demands for the sake of ending the bloodshed. At the same time, however, it should also continue to strengthen the political opposition, while widening sanctions, to increase the attractiveness of a political solution.

Syria's revolution is trapped in a deadly cycle of violence. The February assault on the city of Homs that killed thousands and the cosmetic nature of recent constitutional changes underscore the Assad regime's firm commitment to crushing the opposition in lieu of credible dialogue and reform. In the context of the repeated failure of wider diplomatic efforts, a deep and bloody conflict appears increasingly inevitable. Nonetheless, with Assad holding the military upper hand, and maintaining the cohesion of his security forces, as well as support from internal and external actors, his demise is by no means assured. To date, the balance of power continues to favour the regime.

The escalating, indiscriminate killing of civilians has prompted demands for foreign intervention. The most prominent proposals are the establishment of a humanitarian safe zone in the north of the country along the Turkish border, the provision of military aid to the opposition, or direct air strikes. However, by and large, the calls for direct intervention have fallen on deaf diplomatic ears. It remains uncertain what difference a humanitarian zone would make when the majority of the deaths are occurring elsewhere in the country, particularly as a safe zone has effectively already been established in south-east Turkey. This option would also require significant foreign military power to enforce.

Meanwhile, the prospect of arming the opposition raises concerns inside and outside the country. Channelling weapons into the country would likely set the scene for an

even deeper and long-lasting civil conflict with very uncertain regional consequences (particularly given the indeterminate nature of many of the country's armed groups). Though unarmed civilians continue to bear the devastating brunt of the crackdown, expanding and supporting armed resistance would invite even wider violence. Moreover, unless foreign backers were prepared to provide artillery and air capabilities, arming the opposition is unlikely to change the balance of power. It is more likely that arming the opposition may further empower the regime by discrediting the opposition among Syrians still on the fence, while also providing justification to the regime (and its international backers) to continue using violence. Finally, air strikes remain deeply problematic because of both Syria's strong Russian-supplied air defence systems and the complexity of a battle that is largely unfolding in urban environments.

All of these options, though opening the possibility of an eventual rebel victory, do so by enabling a wider militarisation of the conflict that is likely to be long and painful for much of the country's population.

In such a context of spiralling violence and the implausibility of intervention, it is becoming more urgent than ever to craft a political solution. While a political solution involving direct, unconditional talks with Assad understandably remains anathema to many, the reality is that the regime could stay in power for some time yet, while continuing to inflict more losses on its citizens. Although Assad is politically and economically weak, his demise could take many months or even years to unfold. If only from a humanitarian perspective, it is imperative to renew political alternatives.

Importantly, this route will also empower the opposition narrative and its political actors in a process that is more likely to result in the eventual demise of a regime that today represents a shell of its former self. A political track automatically favours the opposition; there is no way back for the regime. As such it may in fact be a surer - and less bloody - way of forcing the regime out, even if it does not see Assad immediately removed from power.

A way forward

Policy options are thin at best, but there are nonetheless a number of measures that could be attempted to advance a political solution with the immediate aim of ending the violence and preventing the country falling into deep and prolonged conflict. The different steps should offer the possibility of a credible political path forward for the different internal and external parties; strengthen the country's political opposition; and increase pressure on the regime as a means of forcing them to accept a political rather than military solution. By extension, these measures will seek to peel away regime support from the immediate Assad-Makhlouf clan at the heart of the regime, increasing the chances of an internal coup of sorts. The recent appointment of Kofi Annan as the joint UN-Arab League representative

to Syria offers an opportunity to reinvigorate this process. The international response should now be based on three strategic aims:

Establish international consensus

The regime will only succumb to pressure if there is an international consensus on the need for an immediate end to the violence and for a political process. It is therefore imperative that Russia, as the key actor hitherto blocking a united international front – and thereby giving the regime continued cover – be drawn into the process. But a loss of Russian support alone may not be sufficient to push Assad to the negotiating table, particularly if it continues to secure assistance from Iran and Hezbollah, and economic routes to Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan remain open. Thus all of these actors also need to be drawn into the process. Equally, countries linked to the “Friends of Syria” group, which includes European states, will need to reverse their own position and consent to a process that involves negotiations with the regime. The establishment of consensus will require significant compromises from all parties.

Delink the crisis from broader strategic aims

It is disingenuous for parties from either side to claim that the Syria crisis is purely an issue of democracy or foreign interference. The crisis in Syria is increasingly seen through the lens of wider strategic ambitions. On the one hand, Arab states (such as Saudi Arabia) and the West see the demise of Assad as a means of weakening Iranian influence in the region. Meanwhile, Iran and its ally Hezbollah see the survival of the regime as a key means of protecting their own sway. So long as Syria remains a playground for these broader interests, the prospect of a united front geared towards ending the bloodshed remains remote at best. Those driving the diplomatic process need to prioritise a ceasefire and ending the violence.

Empower the political opposition

The political leadership of the Syrian opposition remains highly divided and unable to present itself as a credible vehicle for a transition. Until it is able to offer a more transparent vision for the future of the country that appeals to both elements within the regime apparatus, as well as other groups such as some of the middle class and minorities, it will be unable to draw the wide-based support needed to displace Assad and lead a transition process. International backers of the opposition in Europe and elsewhere must therefore do all they can to strengthen the representative power of the opposition, particularly those voices from within the country.

There are several tangible policy options to drive the adoption of a political process:

Kofi Annan should immediately reach out to Moscow, offering it an open role in shaping a transitional process. Russia should be treated less as an obstacle and more as a channel of dialogue with forces around Assad. Moscow continues to provide material support to the Assad regime and has established links with the Syrian military and intelligence institutions (potentially akin to the US military's relationship with Egyptian security services) that could be leveraged as part of a transitional arrangement. While much has been made of Russia's rejection of UN action on Syria, wider interests could nonetheless still tip the balance of Russian support away from Assad. Russia is sacrificing its broader regional ties in defence of Assad, notably its relations with Gulf States – an issue that is already causing some consternation among business groups and diplomatic circles in Russia. The ongoing weakness of the Assad regime also suggests that Russia may ultimately be left with no partner at all if it maintains its current position. To draw Russia on board, other diplomatic players, including Europe and the US, need to better understand its motivations. Moscow has voiced fear about the establishment of a precedent of Western intervention, whether direct or indirect, following NATO's perceived disregard of the UN mandate on Libya. More broadly, in the context of President Putin's own democratic deficit, joining forces with a Western-led initiative to empower popular protests against a long-standing ally is highly unattractive. Annan must therefore reach out to Moscow to assuage these concerns.

In order to achieve this end, Moscow's own proposals must be advanced: Russia has stated that it favours a political dialogue, but only one at which the regime is also represented. It has even laid out the possibility of hosting talks as an alternative to UN action. This initiative should be embraced by Annan, who should chair an initial contact group meeting (potentially in Russia in order to incentivise Moscow and give it a stake in the success of the process) that draws together all the parties with the express aim of establishing an immediate ceasefire and the return of monitors into the country (that includes a Russian contingent) with a more robust set of technical capabilities. This meeting should include the opposition and the regime, as well as representatives from Syria's Arab neighbours, and Turkey and Iran. It should not be spearheaded by Europe or the US, which would play into Moscow's fears of Western-led intervention. The success of the meeting will be firmly premised on the delinking of the issue from broader regional ambitions. As such, Annan should also push Saudi Arabia and Qatar to support this track. The initial price of a ceasefire, which will only materialise if there is united international pressure on Assad to stand down his military forces, will inevitably be an outcome that favours the regime's position on the ground. However, in view of its current military might, the difficulty of securing Russian support and the necessity of saving Syrian lives there is no other way forward.

At the same time, Annan should seek to leverage greater Russian support in two key ways. In the first instance, through the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Arab states must encourage and pressure China to change tack. Beijing's significant regional energy interests and its already reluctant support of Assad mean it is ripe for turning – like Moscow it has also called for talks that include the regime. A recent Chinese envoy to Damascus suggested a six-point peace plan that includes an immediate end to all violence and the beginning of political talks to be led by the UN and Arab League, showing a willingness to engage in the process that should be quickly tapped into. Any shift by China would leave Russia more marginalised than ever. Meanwhile, the Arab League and GCC must make a serious outreach effort to Russia, highlighting the importance and potential of broader regional interests. The current deterioration in GCC-Russian relations highlights Moscow's sole reliance on Assad as a regional ally – the Gulf can offer Russia an alternative vision for its regional ties.

Annan should encourage the opposition to enter a political process without the precondition of Assad's departure, though assurances can be given that this remains the ultimate goal in order to incentivise them to accept talks. While some of the opposition will reject this route, other meaningful elements, particularly inside Syria – as well as large chunks of the non-mobilised population – would welcome an opportunity to engage in a political solution that potentially averts prolonged civil war. There are significant, legitimate worries among much of the population about an impending-Iraq style disaster.

Following the establishment of the contact group, more substantial talks driven by domestic political actors should be held, ideally in Syria. Under Annan's leadership the contact group could advance an initial Yemen-style transition that would see Assad stand down but which would not fully dismantle the regime (though this should not precondition the talks). While this scenario is far from ideal, it will accomplish two key aims. Firstly, it will offer the broader regime a credible way forward. Already some senior Alawites are acknowledging the inevitability of change and saying that the Assad-Makhlouf family cannot be part of the future. Secondly, the plan will offer the prospect of continued leverage to Russia in a post-Assad era. (For the same reason Iran and Hezbollah may be willing to accept this outcome, making them less likely to prop up Assad to the bitter end.) While this outcome would not be dissimilar from the previously rejected Arab League plan, new Russian pressure as well as the deteriorating situation on the ground could now make it more palatable to elements within the regime.

Meanwhile, Europe, the US and Arab states should tangibly support the creation of a unified opposition body that represent different streams, including hitherto marginalised voices within the country. Current divisions are based as much on competing personalities as different agendas and the opposition should be pushed to overcome

them. European states could offer technical expertise to the opposition to formulate a clear transition plan in order to present it as a credible leadership actor. The opposition also needs to work to cement political control over armed elements, while committing itself to national goals, and delinking its struggle from broader regional and foreign policy concerns.

The opposition must reach out with greater conviction to the country's minorities. This should involve greater representation within the opposition leadership bodies, but also a more transparent role on the part of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Nonetheless, unity should clearly be articulated on pan-Syrian lines and not sectarian identities. The opposition should refrain from sectarian quotas that risk exacerbating the divisions. Russia can play an important role here, by reaching out to its longstanding contacts in the Alawite-dominated army and potential links with the Orthodox Church to draw them to the table; in one sense Russia can act as their guarantor, making them more willing to join a transition process.

Europe, the US and Arab states should immediately offer supplies of non-lethal aid to the opposition in Syria. This should prioritise medical supplies and communications equipment. The latter will be particularly important in helping the opposition develop a united voice from within the country.

Continued pressure needs to be exerted on the regime and its supporters by the EU, US and others. While national-level sanctions that harm the wider population should be avoided, sanctions that target the regime's financial base and its supporters should be expanded. By publicly holding out the threat of sanctions and casting the net more widely, in terms of asset freezes and travel bans, Europe in particular (where many Syrians have long travelled for pleasure, education and health reasons) will highlight the prospect facing those who continue to support Assad.

The intended aim of these different measures is to stop the violence and lay the groundwork for a subsequent political transition process. This journey will be messy and many will be disheartened to see short-term leniency granted to the regime and its cronies. There is no denying the deep unpleasantness of dealing with Assad and empowering Moscow despite its obstructionist position to date. But it is hard to conceive of any other way of stopping the current bloodshed. Equally, this option could ultimately bear most fruit for those seeking Assad's downfall. A transition to a political track will empower the opposition and strengthen its ability to finally dislodge a horrific regime.

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