



Imagining a Conflict Resolution in Syria: Implications for US Policy

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The Vienna talks on October 30 launched the third international attempt to resolve the four-year-old conflict in Syria, proposing an end to violence “as soon as possible” and a greater international consensus about the path forward. However, there is no indication that a political solution is attainable in the foreseeable future and there is no full grasp yet on the impact of Russian airstrikes on the military balance of power in Syria.

The Syrian regime believes time is needed to capitalize on the Russian airpower and the Syrian opposition will not want to give an impression of retreat. This premature diplomatic initiative on the heels of a Russian intervention is not expected to gain any traction as both sides are still hoping to alter the balance on the ground to negotiate from a position of strength. A foreign imposed political transition is not viable and could lead to further escalation. The eventual breakdown of the Vienna talks could lead to a proxy “soft war” in Syria between Washington and Moscow, in particular if Russia continues to target US assets in Syria.

Iran’s participation in Vienna not only reflected a US policy shift but also a weakened Syrian political opposition compared to the period leading to the Geneva II conference in February 2012. The tensions between Riyadh and Tehran during the talks were a reminder that a US-Russian “quid pro quo” is a necessary but insufficient requirement to pave the way for a political process. A lot has changed since Geneva II, most notably the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the wave of Syrian refugees, which altered the mindset in the United States and Europe vis-a-vis the Syrian conflict, in particular after the November 13 attacks in Paris.

Small-scale confidence building measures can be an alternative, as the Vienna talks will likely reach an impasse. Learning from the failure of his predecessors in brokering a national ceasefire, United Nations-Arab League Envoy Staffan De Mistura’s rare achievement has been coordinating on-demand local ceasefires. While his efforts in Aleppo failed, the Zebdani ceasefire in September 24 relatively succeeded in setting a model to follow when fighters on the ground face an impasse. The debate about whether a ceasefire should be announced before, after or parallel to the launch of a political process is futile. The fighting and the flow of weapons will likely not stop until a deal is reached and even after that it will take a while to enforce a nationwide ceasefire.

This analysis will assess the three layers of influence in the Syrian conflict: the US-Russian on the international level, the Saudi-Iranian at the regional level and the opposition-regime on the local level. It will also consider three potential conflict resolution scenarios if Syria continues

down this trajectory: an extended political transition that makes the country difficult to govern, a sweeping military victory by one side or the other, and *fait accompli* federalism.

The Road to Vienna

It is worth noting that the current heightened level of diplomatic efforts to reach a political solution in Syria is not unprecedented and has evolved along the gradual shift of the conflict from public demonstrations to armed rebellion and now a full-fledged civil war. The failure of the Arab League initiative in January 2012 to impose a ceasefire, as President Bashar Assad's regime was brutally responding to wave after wave of demonstrations, was the first signal that Syria was heading toward an armed rebellion.

The six-point plan, put forward by UN Joint and Arab League Envoy Kofi Annan in April 2012, focused on establishing a centralized ceasefire and rules of conduct, but the regime's continuous firing of heavy weapons against civilians, the steady flow of arms to rebels and a divided UN Security Council complicated Annan's mission, which led to his resignation. The high point of his successor, Lakhdar Brahimi, was bringing the regime and the opposition together in one room for 30 minutes in January 2014, yet with his resignation in May 2014 two trends became apparent: a military solution is improbable and the Syrian opposition is not ready to provide a viable alternative to the regime.

Staffan De Mistura, whose appointment as UN envoy in July 2014 coincided with the rise of ISIL has offered a cautious approach with "a managed, phased, gradual controlled transition to avoid a repeat of the problems we had in Libya and in Iraq."¹ He also suggested confidence-building measures where the regime and opposition representatives would discuss in four thematic committees issues pertaining to the political transition. This plan's only positive outcome was unifying the Syrian political and armed opposition in an unprecedented way to unanimously boycott the sessions, affirming that they offer no clear endgame.²

The Vienna declaration on October 30 reiterated important provisions from the Geneva Communiqué, however the explicit mentioning of the need to defeat ISIS while leaving out the provision about a "transitional governing body" reflected the changing dynamic of the Syrian conflict and the lack of consensus on what constitutes a political solution. The survival of these talks largely depended on muting any discussions regarding Assad's political future. A US official described the existence of "wide disparities on how Assad goes, when he goes and what happens after."³

The International Syria Support Group's meeting in Vienna on November 14 offered a broad plan with four key elements⁴: 1) establishing a close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel

¹ Security Council briefing on the situation in Syria, Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. United Nations. July 9, 2015. <http://www.un.org/undpa/speeches-statements/29072015/syria>

² Asaad Hanna. Why Syrian opposition rejected the UN's plan for Syria. Al-Monitor. October 16, 2015. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/syria-opposition-political-military-reject-de-mistura.html#>

³ Elise Labott. Kerry to hold new talks on post-Assad talks this week. CNN. October 27, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/26/politics/john-kerry-bashar-al-assad-syria/>

⁴ Statement of the International Syria Support Group Vienna. November 14, 2015. The United Nations.

political process, however this ceasefire does not apply to ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra; 2) convening formal negotiations under UN auspices by the end of the year between Syrian regime and opposition representatives; 3) setting a six-month timeline to establish new “governance” and holding elections within 18 months based on a new constitution; and 4) tasking Jordan to develop a “common understanding” of who is a terrorist in Syria. However, developments on the ground do not seem to reflect that Syria is on the verge of a national ceasefire or a political breakthrough, while the timeframes for forming a new government and holding elections seem politically and logistically unrealistic.

Syria’s Spheres of Influence

The momentous political developments since last year had a significant impact on the dynamic among each of the three layers of influence in Syria. While it became obvious in September 2014 that Washington wants to disengage its priority to fight ISIS from the ongoing civil war, Moscow decided to pursue both objectives by directly intervening in the conflict. Russian strikes against targets in Syria since September 30 have been focusing on rebel groups to ease pressure on the regime forces, while US airstrikes seem to focus on ISIL and on supporting Kurdish groups. Yet, both sides are increasingly aware of their limited ability to influence what is happening on the ground.

On the political track, US Secretary of State John Kerry summed up the current state of American policy: “nothing would do more to bolster the fight against Daesh than a political transition that sidelines Assad so that we can unite more of the country against extremism.”⁵ He mentioned three “interrelated goals”⁶ for the US in Syria: defeating ISIL, diplomatic efforts to end the war, and help regional friends avoid a Syrian spillover. This ambiguous approach can only confirm that the only US strategy in Syria is intended to have no strategy, because there is simply no interest in any sort of intervention.

The Russian intervention in Syria did not bring the US closer to the Syrian opposition. There is still skepticism on both ends of this relationship. A US official noted that inviting the Syrian opposition to Vienna would be “counterproductive” before having Russia and Iran on board since they both “have an effect on Assad’s decision making.”⁷ This suggested top-down approach by Washington will likely reach an impasse.

For Moscow, what matters is a political process that keeps the institutions of the Syrian regime mostly intact while the Russian policy remains non-committal on the issue of keeping Assad in power or removing him. The rush in Moscow’s current peace proposal to embark on a dialogue between the regime and the opposition reflects eagerness to ignore for now the stepping aside of Assad, which was proven to be a recipe for failure in Geneva II. The main lesson of the last few years is that when push comes to shove both Washington and Moscow are prone to go along the

⁵ John Kerry. Remarks at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. October 28, 2015. U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/10/248937.htm>

⁶ John Kerry. Remarks on the U.S. Strategy in Syria. November 12, 2015. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249454.htm>

⁷ Labott, October 27, 2015.

wishes of their respective regional allies, in Riyadh and Tehran, who do not seem eager to terminate the Syrian conflict at any cost.

It is no secret that since the past year the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been witnessing setbacks. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of being an “occupier of Arab lands in Syria”⁸ and Iran considered Saudi Arabia’s move to keep oil prices low as “economic warfare.” Furthermore, Iran’s nuclear deal left Riyadh with rancor about the outcome of increasing international recognition of Tehran’s regional influence.

Saudi Arabia reluctantly accepted Iran’s participation in Vienna, however right after the talks, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir talked about two preconditions for any Syria deal: setting a date for Assad’s departure and having all foreign troops (mainly Iranian) leave Syria at the beginning of the political process.⁹ Saudi Arabia seemed keen to continue supplying additional weapons to rebels to push back the Iranian backed regime forces along the front lines between Idlib and Hama. While Iran seemed more defensive on the idea of a political transition and proposed instead a plan consisting of a national unity government, a ceasefire, fighting terrorism and constitutional reform.¹⁰ The head of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, Major General Mohammad Ali Jaafari was more candid than expected and noted that Moscow “may not care if Assad stays in power as we do. We don’t know any better person to replace him.”¹¹

The domestic scene in Syria is the most complicated layer of influence where the amount of distrust and hatred reached unprecedented levels. Syria’s deputy foreign minister Faisal el-Mekdad said that a political transition exists “only in the minds of those who do not live in reality,”¹² while Assad reportedly expressed to Russian lawmakers readiness to hold early elections and discuss constitutional changes only “after victory over terrorism.”¹³ This delusional stance reflects that the Assad regime perceives the Syrian opposition through two lenses: on one hand a political crisis with a “nationalistic” opposition, which can be solved in a national unity government and, on the other hand, “a war on terrorism”, which needs to be waged.

Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition toughened its stance after the Vienna talks and set two preconditions for any deal: First, Assad or any regime figure with blood on his hands cannot play any role in a political transition, and second, the current Syrian army cannot be the nucleus of a new national army. Additionally, the Syrian opposition asked Washington to help the Syrian Free Army combat both “the Russian-Iranian aggression” and ISIL.¹⁴ On the military side, the

⁸ Riyadh: Iran occupier of Arab land in Syria. The Daily Star Lebanon. October 20, 2015. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Oct-20/319488-riyadh-iran-occupier-of-arab-land-in-syria.ashx>

⁹ Josh Rogin. Iran and Saudi Arabia clash inside Syria talks. Bloomberg View. November 4, 2015. <http://www.bloombergvew.com/articles/2015-11-04/iran-and-saudi-arabia-clash-inside-syria-talks>

¹⁰ Robin Wright. Iran’s Javad Zarif on Russia and peace in Syria. The New Yorker. October 6, 2015. <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/irans-javad-zarif-on-russia-and-peace-in-syria>

¹¹ Jack Stubbs and Polina Devitt. Russia stance on Assad suggests divergence with Iran. Reuters. November 3, 2015.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/11/03/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKCN0SS0TY20151103#0IXrB4JBW6e0eJD1.97>

¹² Syrian minister, in Iran, says no talk of transition from Assad rule. Reuters. November 3, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/11/03/us-mideast-crisis-syria-minister-idUSKCN0SS19I20151103#uZXGwfeZsK5mey6P.97>

¹³ Albert Aji and Sarah El Deeb. Syria’s Assad said to be open to early elections, but only after victory against terrorists. The Associated Press. October 25, 2015. <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/10/25/assad-fighting-terrorism-leads-to-political-solutionhttp://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/10/25/assad-fighting-terrorism-leads-to-political-solution>

¹⁴ Washington: We oppose any role for Bashar in Syria and we ask for his departure. Etifaf. October 29, 2015. <http://www.etifaf.org/اخبار-كامل/news/اشنطن-بر-حيله-ونطالب-سوريه-بقي-النيشار-دور-اي-نعراض.html>

opposition is locked down in a fight with the regime in the northeast, while the latter, with Russian air support, is attempting to recapture strategic territories overlooking coastal areas. It is still difficult for both rivals to acknowledge that beyond tactical gains, a military victory is not probable.

Imagining a Conflict Resolution

A division inside the Syrian regime leading to its gradual breakup will likely not occur in the foreseeable future as there is no daylight between the core security sector and Assad's ruling circle, a signal for the dissolution of an authoritarian regime. The ideological nature of the military, the sectarian fabric of the country and the extent of regional intervention make Syria a complex model for political transition. For the rebel forces, they are fighting the Assad regime with ISIL at their back, which is not an ideal tactical environment to operate in. This stalemate is likely to be sustained in the foreseeable future.

There are indeed arduous questions about how to embark on a political transition in Syria. In recent years, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative in Yemen was discussed as a possible model for Syria where Assad can step aside in return for personal immunity, which paves the way for a power-sharing deal. This scenario has proven detrimental to Yemen. Regardless whether Assad stays in power or not, in Damascus or not, his influence in shaping events will not diminish in a political transition. The Assad regime holds two crucial bargaining cards: the keys to a transitional government and the Alawite community.

However, looking beyond the controversial issue of Assad, there are three likely conflict resolution scenarios if Syria continues on this trajectory.

If a political transition deal is reached, it will undergo a lengthy impasse to form a power-sharing government led by a prime minister representing the Syrian opposition with an Alawite president holding ceremonial authorities. The challenges for the transitional body will be almost insurmountable. Rebel groups in some parts of Syria might refuse to lay down their arms. Alawite paramilitary forces will be hard to control and the regime will be hesitant to rein them in. The opposition will reluctantly accept to keep the military structure, and the Free Syrian Army will have to be integrated in the national army. The logistics of preparing a national election will take longer than expected. The "truth and reconciliation committee" will hit a stalemate, as the opposition would insist on prosecuting key figures in the Assad regime. Kurdish groups will stay on the fence, with a clear and consistent demand for autonomy. Over all, Syria will produce a fragile political system managed by regional intervention.

By definition, a transition is an evolution between two political systems. This first scenario is probable when rivals agree that changing the current regime or defending it is not possible by coercion. The transition does not necessarily lead to a democratic system and it could actually revert back to a new form of authoritarianism, whether individualistic or sectarian. This scenario could take Syria on a long road of strenuous transition.

The second scenario is an unlikely military victory. Damascus is bombed forcing Assad to flee the country or the regime forces sweep off Idlib and Aleppo forcing a massive wave of refugees. In the first case, the Free Syrian Army struggles to subdue infighting among rebels or retribution against Alawite elements affiliated with the regime. In the second case, the regime uses excessive power to subdue the territories controlled by the opposition making it almost impossible to restore stability. In both cases, ISIL will likely seize the power vacuum and launch an offensive to claim additional territories. What is likely to emerge in this scenario is an inherently unstable system that cannot be sustained in the long run.

The only way to reach common ground seems through declaring territorial autonomy for the combatants on the ground based on the existing balance of power, which might eventually lead to infighting in the territories held by the opposition. This third and most plausible scenario unfolds when rivals are tired of fighting and when talks about political solution reach an impasse after years of exploring all possible routes. The geographical boundaries are drawn more or less and there is no appetite to reach a power-sharing deal. The United Nations negotiate a national ceasefire, which gradually becomes the basis for a loose federal system or autonomous regions controlled by Alawite, Sunni and Kurdish elements in addition to the areas controlled by ISIL along the Euphrates River.

There are few constants in any potential scenario in Syria. A weak and divided country is emerging in the long term and will continue to be non-democratic and marred by sectarian tensions. Alawite insurgency, whether political or military, is inevitable. The moment a political solution or transition is reached, the regime and all what it represents will become a disruptive force. Control of key areas in Syria by Kurdish groups and their professional combat skills will consolidate an autonomous region along the border with Turkey.

Indeed, the Syria we know historically does not exist anymore. The country has lost its secular military image, its restrictive ideological doctrine and its status as a regional power. Syria was never a familiar place for US policymakers besides mediating issues of war and peace between Israel and the Syrian regime over the past few decades. Beyond the growing threat of ISIL in Syria, there is not much at stake for the US and Russia to justify their long-term presence. Meanwhile, Iran and Saudi Arabia are leaving their footprints in Syria for the long run, and unless the two archrivals mend fences or at least manage their unresolved tensions, a deal cannot be reached. US diplomatic efforts are better served by working with Russia to restore some normalcy to the overall relationship between Riyadh and Tehran to allow for things in the region to start falling into place.

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