



# A Diplomat's Perfect Storm: How to Move Forward in Syria

BY THOMAS R. PICKERING

**F**or over two years, we have watched the disintegration of Syria, the shredding of its population and the anguish of a civil war which has now killed over 150,000 - 200,000. A critical country in the heart of the Middle East remains suspended between death by a thousand cuts and a world apparently incapable or unable to come together to attend to even its most elemental needs. It has now descended into a three cornered conflict between the Assad regime and among its opponents – al Qaeda-related fronts against more moderate fighters. Those who two years ago foresaw a short if brutal war have been shown to be wrong. Those who hoped for but saw no signs of a political settlement have been honored only in the failure of their hopes.

This brief article is designed to evaluate where we now find ourselves and suggest some ways forward. A hard task in any such situation it is made even harder by the intensifying conflict inside the country and the competing interests of foreign powers in dealing with Syria.

There is much to write about the history of this successor state (one among many) to the Ottoman Empire. A period of French rule under a League of Nations Mandate ended with Syria's independence in 1946. A period of rotating governments with military rule pre-dominating ended nearly four decades ago with the rise to power of Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite Air Force general, who held on to power for the following three decades until he died and was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad in 2000.

Syria never pretended to be a modern democracy. It was an Alawite minority-ruled, majority Sunni state. It lost the Golan Heights to Israel in 1967 and while small adjustments were made

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through U.S. brokered negotiations in 1974, the territorial occupation of the Golan has remained a thorn in the flesh of Syria and the Assad family and their supporters ever since.

In 2010, Assad's minority rule was challenged by peaceful demonstrations to replace the regime, largely articulated by majority Sunni groups. The other minorities, Kurds, Druze and Christians in the main, hung on with their long-term Alawite benefactors and protectors or sought to stay out of the conflict altogether. The Alawites, a minority themselves representing only 12 percent of the population, understood the value any ruling minority in the Middle East attaches to aligning itself with the rulers, whether a minority or majority of the population. They played that card skillfully over the years.

Syria has always been impacted by outside players to a significant extent, although the tight hand of the Assads and their rule sought seriously to limit foreign influence. Turkey to the north enjoyed mixed relations with Syria. In times of stress, the Turks knew how important water flowing out of their high plateau hinterland through the Euphrates was to the survival and prosperity of Syria. And when necessary, they were ready and able to shut it off or slow its flow.

To the east, Iraq - an independent fellow Arab state since 1932 - has been at odds with Syria from the time the ruling caliphate moved from Damascus to Baghdad at the beginning of the ninth century.

Saudi Arabia and Jordan, long linked with the families of Damascus, followed their own interests. In the case of the former, generous assistance, especially in times of conflict, made a difference. In the case of Jordan, often presumed by Syria to be a legitimate part of "Greater Syria" built around its capital Damascus, the play has been more careful and balanced. Jordan was attacked by Syria following the conflict with Israel in 1967, but resisted by Jordan with support from Israel and the west. King Hussein enjoyed a longish honeymoon with Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s. He then shifted his interests and sources of income to Saddam Hussein and Iraq in the buildup and following the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran when the military supply and other pipelines to Iraq ran mainly through Jordan.

Israel has always seen Syria as the most recalcitrant and hard-nosed of its enemies in the Arab world. Close links between Syria and Iran made this conclusion even more salient. Iran, a supplier of arms and a defender of Syria's political interests, significantly increased its influence in the region by patronizing the Assads and Damascus. It continues to do so.

To the west Lebanon has always been viewed by Damascus as another legitimate part of “Greater Syria,” that was severed illegally by the French from the organic Syrian state. Occupied at times by the Syrians, the Lebanese have sought to escape Syrian clutches, particularly those parts of Lebanese society, mainly Christians, who see Syria as a natural adversary. In the meantime the Lebanese based Shi’a militia group, Hizbullah, has played an important role in fighting in support of the Assad regime which has undermined to some extent its influence in Lebanon.

Needless to say, each of these players has been deeply engaged in the civil war in Syria and widely impacted by it. Saudi Arabia, joined by Qatar, has supported Sunni opposition elements including the growing number influenced heavily by al-Qaeda and its subordinate Jabhat al Nusra. Iran’s close relationship to Assad and the Alawites, an offshoot of Shi’a Islam, has helped stimulate a wider Shi’a-Sunni sectarian conflict among Muslims in Syria and beyond.

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### **Crisis in a Region in Crisis**

Despite early predictions of military victory, mainly on the part of the opposition, no military victory for them appears in sight on any horizon. While the Assad forces have made some gains, including in some critical pieces of geography, there is also no likely military victory on their side any time soon. The newest subset of the conflict between al Qaeda-linked

fundamentalist fighters and more moderate Sunni opposition fighters has added to the complexity and frustration of all efforts to find a solution. In the meantime, the death toll rises inexorably and uncontrollably. If this is not genocide in one sense, it is a double genocide in another. According to the United Nations both sides are dying at a combined rate of over 6000 per month. The cruelty and deep ideological and theological commitment on both sides seems unalloyed by any sense of respect or mercy for a civilian population largely caught up in the fighting or the nine million refugees who have moved to escape the carnage. The displaced are largely within Syria itself, but well over a million have left, putting tremendous pressure on Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq in roughly that order.

Indeed, both the fighting itself and the proximity and partial involvement of other players, has led to a destabilization of big swaths of the region. Here again, Lebanon and Jordan are perhaps the most seriously impacted. Also, as noted above, inside Syria there is seemingly an inexorable movement toward radicalization, particularly where the opponents of the Assad regime are concerned. Moderate elements among them have been eclipsed in their influence both by the external support for more radical and fundamentalist fighters on the one hand, and by the latter’s reputation as a committed, hard fighting force on the other.

We should not overlook the less visible, but nevertheless important training effort of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). General Qasem Suleimani and his IRGC, now apparently responsible in Iran for the full Syria account, have been training Alawite militias as well as the Syrian Armed

Forces and some of their brutal auxiliary militiamen.

In its own form of radicalization, the major effect of this support from Iran within the Assad regime is to backstop and stiffen its refusal to move toward a political resolution of the problems on grounds demanded by a large part of the international community – the removal of the Assads from power.

A further Iranian training effort is also reported in and around the Alawite homeland in northwestern Syria. Here, the effort appears to be to build up a militia which can consolidate, through “ethnic cleansing,” and defend this “homeland” under any and all future conditions. The Alawites, once oppressed by the Sunni majority before the Assad ascendancy, have now turned the tables for years on their former oppressors. The result is that Syria has become the epitome of a brutal interior conflict with all its outrages and killings.

Syria has long been known to possess a significant capability in chemical weapons, including some modern and highly lethal nerve gases, among them sarin, as well as a missile delivery capability based on Soviet Scud technology and equipment. On August 21, there was a major attack in Damascus from the area controlled by the Syrian Armed Forces, killing over 1500 and using gases known to be in the Syrian inventory. In a seemingly unexpected reversal of objectives after this attack and before the United States could riposte with military force – there were clearly different views in the U.S. public and Congress over what action to take at that point – Russia took the lead in following up a suggestion by Secretary of State John Kerry that the Syrian chemical weapon stockpile be destroyed, thereby shifting the terms of the debate over action in Syria.

Syria rapidly accepted this proposal, and an agreement was worked out by the U.S. and Russia. UN inspectors verified the stockpiles and their locations, production facilities and unfilled delivery vehicles were destroyed, The U.S. agreed to provide a vessel (MV Cape Race) equipped to destroy at sea the 500 tons of lethal agent still in storage under UN supervision in Syria. Free passage within Syria for the lethal chemicals was guaranteed, and Danish and Norwegian naval vessels were committed to transport the material to Italy, where the U.S. will assume custody and responsibility for its at-sea destruction. The apparent rapid shift in developments in Syria has raised a number of interesting questions.

Were the remarks by Secretary Kerry on the destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons impromptu and un-planned? Though this might be the case it has emerged that beginning at least a year or more ago the U.S. and Russia had discussed the need to deal with Syria’s chemical weapons and possibly the option of seeking to remove them entirely from the conflict zone. There were initial doubts both about Russian readiness to actually carry out the destruction that has begun under UN supervision. There were also doubts about Syria’s willingness to go along with a rapid and demanding time schedule for doing so. However, at this point the process is moving ahead with perhaps surprising success.

The question then arises, why did Russia align itself with the U.S. on this issue? The answers here are less clear, but several need to be considered. Russia had no easy answer to the immanent U.S. use of military force in response to the regime’s August 21 gas attack, revealing their inability to meet commitments to the Assad regime. Of even greater concern for Russia was leaving the regime at risk of

destruction and disintegration from which it would be unlikely rapidly to recover as a result of the anticipated attacks by the U.S. and others. Russia has also been concerned by the radicalization of the Islamic elements and the fact that their radicalism and perhaps even the use of chemical warfare on both sides could quickly spread to its own 20 million Muslims beginning in the South Caucasus. Finally, the Soviet Union in the past and today Russia under President Vladimir Putin aspires to great power status which in part is exemplified by joining the United States in the resolution of major conflicts around the globe. Co-equal status in the project of the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons met that aspiration neatly and rapidly.

The third question is whether in fact the U.S. and its public wanted to engage more deeply in Syria through the commitment of military force? The uncertainties here are magnified by President Obama's decision to seek Congressional approval for such military commitment, by public polling data which indicated widespread public opposition to further military engagement in the Middle East and Syria in particular, and by the sense of relief in the U.S. at Russia's acceptance of and cooperation with the program to destroy Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

A fourth question is whether the chemical weapons agreement represents a victory for the Russians and President Putin in a zero sum contest with the U.S.? Opponents of President Obama sought to describe it as such and felt that a major opportunity was missed by not using military force. The administration understood that the arguments against this view would play out in its favor. Principally, a Russian effort to remove from play in the region Assad's most powerful deterrent against

Israel and others would not be seen as supporting the Syrian regime. Also, subsequent Russian statements about the possible removal of the regime through negotiations have added to the persuasiveness of that argument. Similarly, while Russia gained status and standing in its own search for great power recognition, the U.S. administration sought to use this as an effort to move from the chemical issue to the broader question of a negotiated political settlement in Syria. While Russia and the United States are still not fully aligned on the substance of such an effort, Secretary Kerry was able to persuade Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to support the resumption of political talks on Syria's future, to begin on January 22 in Geneva.

The ultimate question is, would the use of military force by the U.S. have made a difference? While highly dependent on circumstances, such as the target set chosen for such attacks, it is not clear that such U.S. strikes would have altered the present situation significantly. It appeared that one motivation for such attacks was punishment for Assad's crossing the chemical weapons redline. The dangers of attacking Syrian chemical installations would have been substantial with potentially many more innocent civilian casualties. U.S. administration officials were clear that they would not go in that direction. A punishment option then might involve efforts to remove from play areas where the regime held some particularly strategic advantage over the opposition – missiles, artillery, tanks, fixed and rotary aircraft, etc. Attacks on these military assets might have shifted the balance between the opposition and the regime, and that might in turn have also reinforced the need and the possibility of moving ahead on a political settlement. But that conclusion is based on the

assumption that the targets were all well known, could not be hidden, and were indeed major game changers. Many analysts would have pointed out that stand-off and aerial attacks against artillery presented a large intelligence problem - finding and destroying them before they could be moved involved a much longer engagement and the provision of an air force for the opposition. The risk of mission creep in any broader set of options would have been real.

Finally, over the past year and a half increasing but still sporadic efforts have been made to broker or find a political solution to the conflict. First begun under former Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, these efforts early on produced an agreement on some limited principles to guide the process in 2012. Annan has been succeeded in his leadership role of international efforts to find a diplomatic solution by former Algerian Foreign Minister, Lahkdar Brahimi. A date, January 22, has now been set for the resumption of talks, though it is still unknown whether the Syrian opposition will participate, and if so which factions.

In recent days, the split in the opposition between salafists and moderates has grown with an attack by the latter on supply warehouses in which American assistance had been stored prior to its distribution. The radicals have won and the moderate leadership of the Free Syrian Army has been dealt a serious setback. The U.S. has stopped distributing aid and there are reports of a major rethink going on in Washington, though little indication of what direction that might take.

## The Road Ahead

Though all roads ahead appear fraught with peril, there are several possible options or combinations of options available.

While for years there was great distrust and indeed scathing comment about the potential success of any political negotiation, the failure of any faction or side to achieve immediate military dominance on the field, and possibly the growing in-fighting among the opposition, have added to the urgency if not the promise of peace talks. In the meantime, the early high confidence that a military victory was only a few weeks or months away has declined in the face of the hard reality that neither side seems capable of prevailing militarily. In the end, the result will be heavily governed by developments on the ground, and the reaction to those developments of the warring parties and their supporters.

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Most believe that to be effective negotiations must be pursued genuinely by the Syrian parties themselves, including valid representative of all the major factions. Getting them to the table will be the first, and as yet unfulfilled task. Only so many meetings without Syrians can take place without a rapid and serious loss of credibility for the current process.

Enthusiasm for external military intervention - beyond supplying and training the various factions - seems to have diminished; certainly amongst the Western external powers. Such enthusiasm peaked at the time of the

August 21 chemical weapons attack. Negotiation seems now more likely than increased external intervention in the fighting. What might be the course and importance of such an effort?

At rock bottom U.S. and Russian agreement over the general approach and parameters of any negotiations must be reached. That will certainly be necessary if not sufficient. But it could help to persuade others to join in, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey and possibly Iran, each of which is a necessary player. With that sort of consensus agreement, it might be possible over time to get the Syrian players on board. Without it, it is highly unlikely the Syrians will engage seriously.

Many will question why they should join in? For Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it would mean a decision to pursue their objective of regime change by other methods. And right now these other methods may seem slightly to be gaining in credibility, especially as it seems that fractures in the opposition and military gains by the Assad regime are making the early military solution they hoped for appear beyond reach.

While I will briefly examine later some of the process questions in a negotiation, it seems highly likely that the first major task after the Syrians engage, if they do engage, will be to seek a cease fire or regional variants of a cease fire in Syria. Though it will not be easy, three factors press the urgency of a cease fire. The first is the slaughter of innocents and the urgent requirement for greater humanitarian relief. Second, a corridor to move lethal gas to a port, preparatory to its destruction at sea is needed. Finally, the requirement to have some measure of stability during peace talks so they will not be unduly influenced by the persistent ebb and flow of combat.

The first purpose of a ceasefire should be to allow time and space to address the human disaster imposed on the Syrian people by the conflict. Feeding, sheltering and caring medically for their needs should be prioritized and facilitated by such a step and be a primary reason for undertaking it. Clearly, any such effort will also need to consider how to slow down and stop military supply, and confine military forces to areas where they are safe but cannot engage in breaking the terms of the ceasefire.

Any cease fire would have to be monitored by the United Nations or a similar body, but it could not be induced or indeed controlled if major forces in Syria were determined to break it. One important role for the UN in this regard would be to set up stronger contingents in and around the areas dominated by minority populations wherever that can be done. Minorities groups will require some confidence that they will not become the first victims of an agreement, just as the majority will need some confidence that depredations by strong minorities will not serve to create new pretenses for further warfare.

A cease fire will not only provide time for negotiations to proceed without undue external pressure, but also will allow an opportunity to begin to re-build within Syria a legitimate and sustainable Syrian control structure. Here perhaps the gradual training of new and the replacement of old security and police forces by the UN and others could create greater confidence in the future and effect the required change. This was done in El Salvador after the peace there; could it begin in Syria immediately in some areas?

The next task will be to seek a new, temporary, transitional government. The negotiators will have to undertake this task. The best approach for dealing with Assad might well

have to be, "In at the beginning, but out at the end." There are various ways of doing this, including appointing a group of technocrats not closely linked to any of the contesting factions to undertake the initial effort at transitional government. They might immediately replace Assad's current ministers. Later they could move on to building up a new administrative and governmental apparatus that is more broadly and fairly representative through a negotiated time table of steps toward such a change.

Another approach might be to conduct select electoral activities under close UN supervision as part of the process. Local leaders at village and city government level might be selected this way while the appointed technocrats govern at the national level. Over time, elections might also become important in the future definition of national leadership. The UN has strong skills and extensive experience in conducting elections, even in troubled areas. Beginning small in each of these steps would seem wise both to test run the process and to winnow out any mistakes early, but also not to stress this sensitive process, and its participants, prematurely.

### A Viable Process

Ambassador Brahimi will naturally have to play the leading role in any initiative, and will most certainly have his own ideas, but some thoughts based on his past success in Afghanistan are worth considering.

The primary parties concerned are Syrians. They should be the centerpiece of negotiations, along with Brahimi and members of his immediate team. However a critical role will be played by those associated with the various Syrian factions who accept negotiations and the Annan plan as its basis. Like the Bonn

Conference of 2001 for Afghanistan, those parties should be invited by Brahimi if, as and when he believes they can bring to bear positive influence in the negotiating process. Most controversial at the present time will be Iran. In the West there is a strong suspicion that Iran wants to cause trouble and prevent the process from succeeding. General Suleimani is not seen as friendly to a result that over time shunts Assad aside. In the past, Iran was helpful in Afghanistan under different conditions. In Bonn Brahimi opened the meetings to all who wished to attend. With discrete German support he then skillfully arranged the lodgings to suit his negotiating purposes - the more helpful participants were lodged nearer the process venue itself and had greater access.

### Conclusion

If there is an increasing convergence of views between the U.S. and Russia, and in the end neither wants a radicalized and fragmented Syria to be a permanent condition impacting Muslims around the world as well as in their own territories, there is a reasonable possibility of "something to work with" here. Continued fighting seems unlikely to produce anything but more death and carnage. The beginnings of some common interests in a ceasefire and a stable transition are surfacing which might be exploited to determine whether a political solution can be crafted with the parties and others. This will take sustained and committed diplomacy and may break down from time to time. However a diplomatic negotiating process should be seen overall as a much better result than any other process is likely produce. **PRISM**



The Road to Damascus