

# **COMMENTARY**

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## **The Syrian Catastrophe and the World's Deafening Silence**

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**T**he word tragic has often been used to describe the civil war in Syria, but it is a pale description of the raging madness on the ground. The bloodletting and massive destruction that has swept the nation is not a mere tragic event; the magnitude of the destruction and loss of lives is catastrophic by any measure unseen since the horror of World War II. The world is largely watching with apathy, and those with unique interests in the conflict play politics with the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrians who died in vain as there is no salvation in death while unspeakable anguish and pain still awaits the living.

Just imagine the scope of the catastrophe that has been inflicted on a country and people by a vicious dictator who is determined to stay in power even at the expense of subjecting his country to wholesale destruction:

When 250,000 men, women and children are slaughtered and four million people become refugees languishing in camps, this is a catastrophe;

When more than seven million are internally displaced, 14 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, tens of thousands of people are prevented from fleeing and unable to receive international aid, and half the country is in ruin, this is a catastrophe;

And the most catastrophic of all is when a whole generation of young Syrians is lost as it bears long-term disastrous consequences from which the Syrian people will suffer for decades to come.

Sadly, the Obama administration's assistance to spare the lives of tens of thousands of innocent civilians has been lukewarm at best. The Arab states, though providing some assistance to the Syrian rebels, remain unwilling to place ground troops which has and continues to be essential to defeating ISIS.

Russia and Iran stood by their ruthless ally, Assad, and spared no effort to provide him with the military, financial, and logistic guidance he needs to continue to mow down his people with his killing machine. Their political and strategic interests in Syria trump the welfare of the country, and they will do anything to protect their national interests and shape the country's future to fit their needs.

While the US and some of its allies are busy fighting ISIS from the air, they left Assad free to drop barrel bombs, killing indiscriminately thousands of people each month and obliterating whole neighbourhoods with near impunity.

Now, however, that Assad has admitted he is losing ground and lacks sufficient number of troops to fight the rebels on all fronts, and Iran and Russia fear that the rise of ISIS could divest them of their influence in Syria, they have all begun to search for a political solution:

Out of desperation, Assad dispatched his foreign minister Walid Moallem to explore a new opening for peace talks with the Syrian rebels to be arranged by Oman;

Iran has presented a peace plan personally conveyed by Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif to Assad that includes a ceasefire and a power-sharing government with Assad remaining in power, at least for now;

And Russia has invited representatives of the Syrian rebels and the Assad government to visit Moscow for peace talks.

While these initiatives look compelling on the surface, none will lead to a solution unless Washington, Tehran, and Moscow coordinate a joint effort to end the war in Syria, which is now made more likely in the wake of the Iran nuclear deal.

This does not suggest that major difficulties no longer exist. The Arab Sunni states have no serious dialogue with Assad's main patrons, Iran and Russia, and any deal that would be acceptable to these two countries is not likely to be satisfactory to the Sunni states, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

While the US conducted its first drone strike into northern Syria from bases in Turkey by targeting ISIS alone, the US has become a de facto ally of Assad, giving him no reason to stop ravaging the country.

Though Turkey has agreed with the Obama administration to permit US strikes on ISIS targets from Turkish air bases, Ankara is exploiting the new arrangement to strike the Kurds in Syria. Turkey's objective is not only to weaken the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) but also to impede the Syrian Kurds from consolidating their plans to establish an autonomous entity, which could encourage the Turkish Kurds to follow.

Ironically, notwithstanding the stark differences between the main players and their long and short-term objectives in Syria, their common interest to defeat ISIS provides an opportunity for all the countries involved to collectively work for a political solution to Syria's civil war.

Moreover, being that violent extremism and political upheaval is sweeping the Middle East and large swathes of Syrian and Iraqi territory remains under ISIS' control, this provides further impetus to try to end the conflict in Syria before the country disintegrates all together.

In addition, given that conditions on the ground have changed and Assad is becoming increasingly dispensable, Iran and Russia might well be more in tune, at this juncture, to find a political solution that would exclude Assad.

That said, any political solution must be anchored on the establishment of a new transitional government led by representatives of the Sunni majority with proportional representation of all other ethnic and religious factions, including the Alawites.

The US and all other parties concerned about the future stability of Syria should not make the same mistakes they made in Egypt and Libya by prematurely pushing for early elections and writing a new constitution. The transitional government in Syria should remain in place for at least five years while focusing on rebuilding the country and maintaining internal security.

In the interim, political parties will have the time to organize and develop a political agenda with which the public can become familiar before elections are held and the public has had the time to heal and return to some normalcy.

To demonstrate their good intentions, Russia and Iran ought to warn Assad that he must immediately cease and desist from dropping barrel bombs. If he refuses, the US should be prepared to strike Syrian military installations to stop Assad from raining barrel bombs, with or without the consent of Iran and Russia.

None of the interested parties can have it all. The question is, will they muster the moral courage and find a solution to spare what is left of Syria from a catastrophe the world has been watching for nearly five years with deafening silence?

**Note:** This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-syrian-catastrophe-and-the-worlds-deafening-silence/>

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