

# COMMENTARY

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## Syria's Fog of Diplomacy

**Yezid Sayigh**

**Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut**

The flurry of contacts and visits among key external powers involved in the Syrian conflict over the past few weeks has sparked speculation that a rare opportunity to end the war may be opening up. The spate of diplomatic activism is impressive, and almost unprecedented since publication of the “Geneva-1” communiqué in 2012 in encompassing key actors on both sides of the divide. But although the prospect of ending Syria’s tragedy is tantalizing, it remains unlikely. The key external powers have in fact given little sign of changing their basic positions. Instead, when it comes to Syria they seem to be engaged in little more than positioning and public relations.

Despite public references to Syria, much of the political activity by the main external powers relates to their own agendas and priorities. Iranian Foreign Minister Jawad Zarif visited Damascus in early August, where he also met Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, but the fact that he does not manage the Syria file in Iran and that he next went to Pakistani capital Islamabad suggests that his primary role was to clarify the implications for regional counterparts of his country’s comprehensive nuclear deal. Zarif reportedly discussed a peace plan for Syria, but this is simply a revised version of the four-point proposal originally put on the table by Iran in late 2012. More significant is Iranian interest in starting a formal dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council, building on a supposed initiative by Oman with the support of Qatar.

Oman also drew attention by inviting Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem to visit the sultanate in early August, his first to any member of the Gulf Cooperation Council since the start of the Syrian crisis, while reports circulated of direct discussions between Syrian national security chief Ali Mamlouk and leading Saudi officials in July. This coincided with the Assad regime’s claim that it is ready to engage in dialogue with Syria’s “real” opposition, despite

Assad's assertion, in his speech to the Syrian parliament on 26 July, that he sees no hope for a political solution to the conflict. Russia has added to the sense of hope for Syria by offering to host peace talks in Moscow, receiving Khaled Khoja, chairperson of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, cooperating with the U.S. to curb renewed Assad regime use of chemical weapons, and holding consultations at the level of foreign ministers with its U.S. and Saudi counterparts in the Gulf.

Possibly most significant, however, has been the high-profile Saudi diplomatic activism undertaken since mid-June by the kingdom's crown prince Mohammed Bin Nayef, defence minister and deputy crown prince Mohammad Bin Salman, and foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir, much of which has focused on finding common ground with Russia. This represents a positive reversal of the approach taken towards Russia in early 2012, but relates to a range of regional concerns, primary of which is confronting Iran, and not just to peace-making in Syria.

As these examples show, the pursuit by external actors of their own agendas may have the beneficial, if secondary, effect of opening the door for constructive diplomacy over Syria. But Turkey demonstrates the risk posed by pursuing regional agendas that are not closely coordinated with its nominal partners in the anti-Assad front, or even diverge from them. Its resumption of armed confrontation with the Kurdistan Workers Party, driven almost entirely by domestic political considerations and electoral calculations, complicates joint action against both the Islamic State and the Assad regime. The surprise announcement on 16 August that the NATO deployment of Patriot air defence missiles will end in January 2016 reveals an emerging gap with the U.S. and other allies that is not compensated by the recent agreement allowing U.S. aircraft to fly combat missions from the Turkish Incirlik air base.

With so many mixed signals and criss-crossing trends, Syria-related diplomacy evokes the reference by Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz to the opaqueness and uncertainty of military operations as a "fog." This is especially apparent in relation to the possible content of ongoing political contacts among the key external actors in Syria. Much of the media speculation focuses on their ability to agree whether Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should stay in office during a transitional period or leave immediately. But while this is important, it is not the real test of diplomacy. Rather, the hardest bargaining will be about the concrete details of sharing power—among the opposition, but also among regime supporters—providing dependable guarantees of security for key constituencies such as the Alawis, armed forces, and Ba'ath Party—but also the many Syrians who do not trust any of the parties—and maintaining institutional stability in the transitional phase.

Staffan Di Mistura, the U.N.'s Special Envoy to Syria, seems to agree. His proposal to set up working groups to plan for different sectors of governance in preparation for an eventual transition has been taken by some to suggest that a political deal is indeed in the making. But

insiders confirm, to the contrary, that he merely seeks to compensate for the continuing political vacuum. As there is no evidence that such an understanding on concrete details has been reached—or even that discussions have moved to this level—the very fact that ongoing political contacts are so visible suggests they are a substitute for meaningful diplomacy, let alone for substantive agreement. Syria’s fog of diplomacy shows little signs of clearing just yet.

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**Dr. Yezid Sayigh, Senior Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut and a member of the International Advisory Board of MEI@ND. Email: [ysayigh@carnegie-mec.org](mailto:ysayigh@carnegie-mec.org)**

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