

COMMENTARY

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Humanitarian Disaster and Political Illusions

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The continuing carnage and atrocities sweeping across Syria and the savagery committed against innocent men, women and children defy the most nightmarish dehumanization committed by one against another. A government that slaughters its people and maims a whole generation is not a government with whom to negotiate. It is nothing short of travesty that the Obama administration is still mired in the illusion that a political solution is possible. Meanwhile, tens of thousands more Syrians will be killed because of misplaced caution and the loss of moral perspective.

The recent agreement between the US and Russia announced by Secretary of State John Kerry to convene an international conference “as a follow-on to last summer’s Geneva conference” to search for a political solution will undoubtedly meet the same fate as all previous efforts.

It can certainly be argued that a political solution is preferable because the introduction of more sophisticated weapons, necessary to give the rebels the edge in the fighting, could further escalate the conflict and possibly foreclose the prospect for a political solution.

It is also plausible to argue that President Obama has legitimate concerns that the weapons could also fall into the hands of Islamic radicals, who, in turn, might use them against American and allied targets. The merit of these arguments, however, overlooks the reality on the ground that defies a political solution at this late juncture.

First, Bashar Assad did not merely inherit the presidency from his father but a whole governing apparatus, consisting of loyal civilian Ba’ath party elites, a strong military machine with Alawite commanders at the top, powerful internal police forces, and a pervasive domestic intelligence community. All of these agencies are predominantly led by Alawites, whose fortunes and fate depend on the longevity of the Assad regime.

Whether President Assad is given safe passage or killed, there is no future for thousands of these high-ranking officials, who executed Assad's brutal crackdown, to escape retribution. They will be hunted if they remain in the country, regardless of who governs Syria post-Assad.

They are fighting for their lives and will resist any political solution that will not grant them immunity from prosecution and permanently shield them from retribution. Considering the mayhem in Syria, no one can make such a commitment and be in a position to deliver.

Second, there exists the sad culture of revenge and retribution, in which no Syrian who has lost a member of his own or extended family would not seek revenge for the loss of their loved ones. There will be no "truth and reconciliation" à la South Africa. There is no towering figure like Nelson Mandela around whom all factions can coalesce, reconcile and end the gruesome killings that continue to tear the hearts of millions of Syrians.

Moreover, the sectarian conflict feeds into the cycle of retribution. Iraq provides a compelling example: Free and fair elections notwithstanding, the Sunnis and Shiites continue to kill each other ten years after the Iraq war began. The situation in Syria may even be worse than Iraq, and revenge killings will defy any political concoction.

Third, Syria is factional along sectarian lines – Sunnis, Alawites, Christians, Kurds, Shiites, Druze and scores of militant groups – whose rivalry for political power will only begin once Assad is deposed or killed.

It is illusionary to suggest that there can be a peaceful political transition just as much as it is illusionary that representatives of Assad's government and the opposition can form the transitional government, as proposed by the US and Russia.

All rebels, regardless of their political or religious leanings, have stakes in the future political framework. Once the uniting factor – the ouster of Assad – is behind, the political rivalry will quickly translate into renewed violence.

Fourth, Assad enjoys strong alliances, particularly with Iran and Hezbollah, who have deep vested interests in sustaining his regime. For Iran, maintaining its influence in Syria is of the utmost strategic importance to secure its dominance over the predominantly Shiite crescent extending from the Mediterranean to the Gulf.

Hezbollah, which acts as Iran's proxy, will stop short of nothing to undermine any new Syrian government that does not continue to strengthen its power base and remain the flagship of militant resistance against Israel.

Beyond that, however, Syria has become the battleground between the Sunni states-Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and others who back the rebels—and Shiite Iran and Hezbollah who are fighting side-by-side with Assad's loyalists.

No political solution can satisfy both sides as the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites is historically embedded with menacing implications, which could evolve into regional war.

The risks of denying or further delaying the delivery of weapons the rebels need has and continues to prolong the fighting, increasing the number of casualties by tens of thousands, and will almost certainly lead to the complete disintegration of Syria along sectarian lines.

More troubling is that some of the stockpiles of chemical weapons could fall into the hands of extremist groups, with ominous consequences.

Russia continues to provide Assad with highly sophisticated weapons, including air defence systems (under the guise of “old contracts”), and a variety of other offensive weapons and munitions are pouring into Syria from Iran. The US, however, has done little to prevent the flow of these weapons and refuses to lift the embargo on weapon transfers to the rebels.

Certainly, a practical solution to the crisis in Syria would require full cooperation between the US and Russia, but considering the unfolding horror in Syria, neither the US nor Russia can now piece together a political solution that will satisfy all players.

These efforts have failed in the past even with the support of the UN and the Arab League, along with Russia and the US. A political solution was as elusive then as it is now – doubly elusive as the civil war has gone beyond the point of no return.

Meanwhile, with every passing month thousands of Syrian is killed, hundreds of thousands of refugees are flocking to neighbouring countries and as many are becoming internally displaced, and the danger of regional war is becoming ever more threatening. Why then go through this futile exercise when failure is all but certain?

In the summer of 2012, the President turned down the unanimous recommendation of his entire national security team to arm the Syrian rebels. Since then, more than 40,000 Syrians (mostly civilians) were killed.

President Putin kept Assad in power by blatantly providing him with military, financial and political support, enabling him to kill tens of thousands more innocent civilians. By his inaction, President Obama is inadvertently being seen in the region as complicit in Russia’s ruthlessness and Assad’s killing machine.

There may still be time to influence and perhaps even shape the formation of a new representative government if the US precipitates the collapse of Assad’s government sooner than later, as time is running out.

To do that, however, the President must heed the call of our allies in the region, Europe, Turkey, and many leaders in the House and the Senate, who are urging the White House to act now.

It is true that President Obama must not throw caution to the wind, but he must also know that he cannot change the direction of the wind to prevent the gathering storm from sweeping the region and leaving unimaginable destruction in its wake.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/humanitarian-disaster-and-political-illusion/>

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