

# COMMENTARY

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## **The Geneva II Tragic Charade**

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It is hard to imagine that representatives of the 30 countries that assembled in Geneva actually believed that they could find a political solution to the Syrian civil war. Given the differing strategic interests in Syria of the powers within and outside the region, reaching a consensus to end the crisis at this juncture is beyond the realm of possibility. The conditions on the ground in Syria and the balance of power between the rebels and the Assad regime must first be altered on behalf of the rebels in order to force Assad to change his calculation before any political solution can be formulated.

President Obama may strongly embrace the agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons or seek a political solution by holding the Geneva II conference. Unfortunately and predictably, the chemical deal worked only to strengthen Assad as it prevented an American attack and gave him more time to consolidate his gains.

Obama, who is determined not to engage America in another conflict in the Middle East, has left Syria to the whims of Russia's President Putin, who was more than eager to fill in the gap and usurp the political agenda to ensure Russia's long-term interests in Syria.

There are many factors that complicate the prospect of any political solution, which seem to have escaped the Obama administration or were treated with ambivalence.

First, in addition to Russia and Iran, many of the players, including the Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and scores of jihadist groups in and outside the region, have different political agendas and will do everything in their power to thwart any solution that does not serve their interests.

Second, the civil war has now also evolved into a proxy war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. Iraq and now Syria are seen as the battlegrounds of a long-simmering conflict between them and it is unlikely to end in the foreseeable future.

Third, the convenient “political cooperation” between the US and Russia does not obscure the fact that they have fundamental disagreements not only about Assad’s fate but also about the kind of political order that will follow.

Fourth, the war has provided a historic opportunity for scores of Muslim extremists, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra and other al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist groups. They are determined to exploit the chaos in Syria regardless of the price they pay and how high the Syrian death toll rises.

Finally, as the war grinds on and the death toll, destruction, and human suffering reach a calamitous magnitude, both Assad and the rebels have become deeply entrenched and view the war in terms of life or death. As such, it is inconceivable that the two sides can in fact reconcile politically and join hands in a transitional government.

Speculations abound as to how to end this tragedy when no power wants to end it only for the sake of the Syrian people. Geneva II could not even deliver an enforceable agreement to provide food and medicine to children, many who are sick and starving to death. Instead, the leaders in attendance found comfort in the fact that the rebels and Assad’s representatives sat face-to-face and talked.

Given this gloomy reality, one wonders from where a political solution can come to end Syria’s unfolding human tragedy.

First, the idea was floated that the US and Russia could agree on a formula that will force Assad to step down, followed by establishing a transitional government. Russia, in turn, would have to persuade Iran, who is supplying Assad with weapons and material aid, to support the effort.

This would essentially mean that Russia and Iran would maintain their traditional influence in Syria and that any transitional government would have to bow to Iranian and Russian dictates, to which Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states sternly object.

The second scenario by which to end the civil war is if, as a result of indiscriminate bombing by Assad’s forces, many thousands of Syrians are killed at once. The assumption here is that the US will then be forced to strike some of Assad’s military installations and compel him to change his calculus.

This, too, is unlikely to take place as Assad knows that if he commits such an atrocity it could potentially precipitate American reaction, especially now since Obama is under increasing

pressure to revisit his policy of no military interference. Because of that, Assad will instead continue to use systematic bombings that result in the death of dozens at a time to avoid international outrage.

Under such circumstances, Assad will gradually regain lost territories, as he has in recent months, while continuing to butcher his own people in the hopes that he will eventually prevail.

The third scenario is to maintain the current conditions whereby Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states continue to provide the rebels with weapons and other material aid, though not the kind of weapons and the quantity that the US can provide to change the balance of power on the ground.

Iran and Russia will continue to supply Assad with weapons and financial aid, and as such they would prolong the conflict, giving Assad more time to build on his gains and abandon the idea of a transitional government altogether.

This scenario is also unlikely to happen given the deep animosity between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, who are fighting their proxy war in Syria. For these two countries, this is a defining war and both are prepared to spend as much as it takes to continue it, regardless of how many more Syrians die in the process.

The fourth scenario suggests that the effort to establish a transitional government should not come first but instead should follow a comprehensive ceasefire where all combatants (both rebels and government forces) freeze in place.

This would be followed by humanitarian aid to rebel-held areas, which would help build confidence and pave the way for the creation of a transitional government. This, however, presupposes that there would be an agreement on Assad's fate, over which the US and Russia principally disagree.

The fifth scenario, which is more likely to unfold, is that the Syrian civil war will come to an end when both sides reach a point of exhaustion and see no reason in continuing the fight because they would have given up hope of winning or even improving their position.

The fact that scores of jihadists have converged on the country and are committed to fight against any agreement and each other to promote their political agenda further prolongs the war as the fighting no longer has a single purpose.

This is what often happens in a civil war when the combatants are engaged in a protracted fight and neither side can win without gaining a decisive advantage. This situation is further complicated when outside powers continue to support different sides, but not enough to tilt the balance decisively one way or the other.

Under these circumstances, the civil war in Syria could last 10 to 15 years or more. The civil war in Lebanon that lasted from 1975 to 1990 is a case in point; other examples of long and debilitating civil wars include Afghanistan and Sudan.

If this scenario unfolds, Syria will disintegrate, hundreds of thousands more Syrians will die, starvation and diseases will run rampant, and much of the country will lay in ruin. No one can tell how this catastrophe will impact other states in the region, but one thing is certain: not a single country will be spared and the potential for regional conflagration will be omnipresent.

This leaves us with the only viable option that can bring an end to this horrific war. Assad must be made to conclude that he stands to lose even with the continuing support of Russia and Iran.

For that to happen the US must change Assad's calculations by changing the power equation on the ground and give vetted rebels the weapons they need to stop Assad in his tracks and force him out; the US is the only country that can do so. Only then can the international community focus on establishing a representative transitional government to begin the herculean task of rebuilding the country.

Time is running out and every day we continue to embrace the illusion of a political solution. Without first changing the balance of forces on the ground, scores of Syrian men, women and children will die and millions of Syrian refugees will have no home to return to.

The sooner the Obama administration acts with the support of Western and Arab allies, the sooner the unconscionable humanitarian disaster in Syria can come to an end.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/the-geneva-ii-tragic-charade/>

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