



COMMENTARY

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Syria in 2015: Political Stalemate Again, or Compromise?

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2015 has started with three new proposals to resolve the Syrian conflict. UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura continues to put flesh on his “Aleppo freeze” proposal, which the U.S. and European Union have endorsed, through consultation with various Syrian parties—including the regime, principal political opposition, and rebel groups—and with concerned external actors. Russia will host formal talks, dubbed “Moscow-1,” between the Assad regime and a broad opposition delegation at the end of January. And as the international Arabic daily *al-Hayat* recently revealed, several of the most important opposition coalitions have agreed a joint blueprint for transition in Syria, based on a diplomatic framework involving all key external actors, notably including Iran, which the opposition had previously insisted on excluding because of what is seen as its direct military role in support of the Assad regime.

The renewal of diplomatic activity should be a good sign for Syria. Some opposition figures suspect that the “Aleppo freeze” and “Moscow-1” initiatives will merely suspend the conflict in a way that leaves Assad in power. But the new opposition “roadmap for the salvation of Syria” does not explicitly call for Assad’s immediate departure either, in line with the proposal originally presented by the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces at the Geneva-2 peace talks on 9 February 2014. Instead, the “roadmap” focuses on the broad contours of power sharing between the regime and the opposition, with a monitoring role for unaligned civil society representatives.

However, the gap between positions remains fundamental. In theory, new developments on the ground could change this, by forcing one side or the other—or both—to accept serious compromises. But the precedent of 2014 shows that much can change on the geo-political and military levels—in some respects dramatically—yet leave the conflict dynamic unchanged and the political stalemate unbroken.

The sharp deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations over the Ukraine crisis was the most notable development geo-political development of 2014: nearly a year of diplomatic cooperation over Syria ended with the failure of the Geneva-2 peace talks in February, leaving no prospect of joint diplomacy. Similarly, the year started with considerable optimism over the P5+1 talks with Iran over its nuclear program, but hopes that a successful outcome would ease other regional tensions—especially in Syria—were dashed when a comprehensive agreement could not be reached by November.

Iranian-Saudi rivalry, which had eased in Spring 2014, revived by Summer once it became evident that agreement on the nuclear issue could not be reached, making a political deal less likely in Syria—as well as in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. And rifts within the Gulf Cooperation Council over Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood evolved into an Arab “cold war” with direct impacts on the Syrian opposition—as on countries further afield such as Egypt and Libya. The subsequent repair of Gulf relations eased the rivalries that had previously paralyzed the Syrian National Coalition and its interim government in exile, but lingering tensions divided the moderate armed rebellion inside Syria between U.S.-Saudi backed groups and Qatari-Turkish backed ones by the end of the year.

The single most important geo-political and military change, of course, was the rise and expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria. In the first half of the year it drove all other opposition and rebel groups out of the entire northeast—except for Kurdish areas—seizing the oil fields and trade routes from which they had previously derived income and sharply reducing the population they had previously controlled. On the other side, Assad regime forces established a secure corridor to Aleppo and gradually came close to completely encircling the city, while reducing its civilian population to some 150,000 through the massive use of barrel-bombs. In parallel, the regime took much of the Qalamoun region—although it has failed to attain complete control and is unlikely to—and tightened its siege of the Eastern Ghoutah near Damascus.

As a result, Syria's armed rebellion has been pushed into three main pockets: one centred on Idlib province and the western Aleppo countryside, with parts of the northern Hama and Homs countryside; a second in al-Ghoutah; and a third in the southern provinces of Daraa and Quneitra. Indeed, the rebels significantly expanded in the latter area during the last four months of 2014, while reappearing in the Qalamoun, reflecting relative improvement in their cohesion, capability,

and coordination—in part thanks to the training and assistance program run by the U.S.-led Military Operations Centres in Turkey and Jordan. But the problem of rebel fragmentation remains, now compounded by the revival of Jabhat al-Nusra as a leading rebel force, its competition with ISIS, and new divisions as al-Nusra and other Salafist groups wage campaigns against those they deem “corrupt” and blaspheming, as occurred in Idlib province in November and in eastern Ghoutah in early January 2015.

Each of these trajectories of change is important, but none has proved decisive. Collectively, they have renewed the strategic stalemate in Syria, as the various local combatants and their external backers have balanced each shift on the ground with corresponding counter-measures. Little has changed in their objectives or incentives, with one major exception: the challenge posed to all by ISIS. But this, too, may serve to reinforce the stalemate rather than break it.

Further expansion by ISIS could simply harden attitudes on all sides. Turkey would intensify its demand to establish safe zones along its border with Syria, the Obama administration would come under growing pressure at home to commit the necessary military resources for this task, and Russia and Iran would step up their support for the Assad regime in response.

Only if the continuing military campaign against ISIS weakens it significantly in its home base, in Iraq, might a wider understanding over Syria become possible. But that will merely take everyone back to the same range of policy choices and diplomatic options that are already on the table. None of the key parties has the ability to impose a change of terms, so unless they engage with them seriously now, they will condemn Syria to yet another year of mutually hurting stalemate.

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