

Rift Removal

Why cooperation and coordination are the political keys to ending the Syrian crisis.

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The situation in Syria is dire, and there are no good options for addressing it; even the option of doing nothing is terrible, both morally and strategically. Inaction by the international community allows the killing to continue. Military intervention risks uncontrollable involvement without an obvious positive outcome. Although all agree that only a political solution can end the conflict, there is no agreement on the shape of such a solution.

A negotiated settlement will have to get the support of the Western-backed Syrian opposition, the jihadi opposition, the Syrian Kurdish community, the Syrian regime, the neighboring countries, and major interested powers. The formula worked out in June 2012 at Geneva gives both the opposition and the regime veto power over the composition of an interim government that would oversee stabilization, reconstruction, political resolution and, eventually, peace. A successful negotiation in Geneva, then, is a key political challenge on the road to peace. The U.N. secretary-general has taken the first significant step in tackling the challenge, calling for negotiations to commence on Jan. 22, 2014.

But there are many other related political challenges -- in particular, organizational fragmentation. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad has significant military capability and is politically unified. The Russian and Iranian governments support the regime with weapons, fighting formations, money, and political support at the United Nations Security Council. The opposition and its supporters, on the other hand, are fractured. The opposition is divided among the relative moderates in the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, "the Coalition"; the Syrian Kurds; and groups of Sunni, largely foreign jihadists intent on establishing an Islamist state.

Under the leadership of Ahmad al-Jarba, the Coalition struggles to maintain coherence among three factions. The first, with which Jarba is aligned, is supported by Saudi Arabia and led by veteran dissident Michel Kilo; the second, supported by Qatar, is led by Mustafa Sabbagh; the third, under the umbrella of the Syrian National Council, is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, although leaders within the SNC represent different constituencies. Western powers have supported the Coalition with technical assistance, political backing, and limited, non-lethal military equipment.

Regional competition further damages the Syrian opposition. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar provide the opposition with diplomatic and material support; the Saudis and Qataris provide financing; and the Turks allow the opposition to use its territory to organize and train. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, however, support individual leaders rather than a coherent organization. The United Arab Emirates and Kuwait tend to follow the Saudi lead, while Turkey tends to reinforce Qatari initiatives.

This lack of coordination results in rivalries among opposition factions, in particular between the Coalition and the jihadi forces. The perception that jihadi forces are better funded has led several Islamist groups to leave the already-struggling Coalition for the better-funded forces supported by private donors in the Gulf States. The Kurds are divided between the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The KNC has recently aligned with the Syrian National Coalition. The PYD's loyalties are suspect: Its leadership is widely believed to have preserved ties with the Assad regime and recently announced the formation of an autonomous interim government, leading to a backlash from the opposition. Other parties -- the Coalition, the Turks, the Iraqi government -- constantly worry about cross-border Kurdish independence aspirations.

Of the hard-line jihadi groups, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have emerged as the most effective and aggressive, and they compete for territory and influence with the Coalition and its military force, the Supreme Military Council (SMC). Jabhat al-Nusra has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and U.N, among others.

Getting this diverse range of parties to a negotiating table is the immediate challenge. The Syrian opposition is reluctant and divided about participating in the January negotiations, finding it difficult to justify sitting down with a regime that has massacred over 110,000 Syrians with chemical weapons, artillery, fighter bombers, and ground troops. The Syrian Kurds are similarly reluctant to join. Meanwhile, the jihadi extremists are doing better on the battlefield than the moderates, but the regime may be making progress against both. The opposition is not eager to negotiate from a position of perceived weakness, expecting a regime with military momentum to be uncompromising.

What's more, if negotiations do begin as scheduled in January, the SNC would never agree to an interim government headed by Assad -- but without pressure from Russia and Iran, Assad will not step aside. Given this complicated milieu, there are several possible, if improbable, paths forward.

First, if the Russians and Iranians could be convinced that their interests would be protected in a Syria without Assad, they might be able to offer the president, his family, and immediate supporters asylum in Russia or another willing country. The Russians may not have strong ties to Assad himself, but they do have long-standing interests in Syria, including a naval base -- their only base outside Russia's borders. With assurances from Western powers regarding continued influence in a Syria without Assad, the Russians could conceivably be persuaded to ease him out.

The Iranians and their new leadership, meanwhile, are clearly rethinking their role in the world. Remembering Iraq's use of chemical weapons in the Iraq-Iran war, Iranians have been horrified at the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. Furthermore, Hezbollah may have damaged its relations with some of its supporters by openly intervening militarily in Syria, a departure from its traditional focus on Israel. Although keeping the Syria issue separate from the nuclear negotiations will be important, the time may be ripe for Western powers to push the Iranians on Syria.

If the Russians and Iranians agree to lean on Assad to step aside -- not run in next year's election, retire to a nice dacha, agree to tacit understandings on prosecution at the International Criminal Court (ICC) -- the Geneva negotiations would be more likely to succeed in establishing an interim governing authority, or U.N.-supervised elections could identify the leaders of an interim government.

Second, outside powers could agree to cut off assistance and support to their respective sides of the civil war. Without external political and military support, neither side could long endure. Such a withdrawal of support

would require unusual cooperation among the United States, Europeans, Turkey, Gulf Arabs, and Russia -- and again, Iran would have to be involved as well.

The political, religious, ideological, and sectarian divisions between Saudi Arabia and Iran make this option most challenging. No sponsor can agree to withdraw support unilaterally. Such a coordinated action would require unusual cooperation -- but not unprecedented, as the 1990 Lebanon and 1999 Kosovo cases illustrate. A U.N. peacekeeping force could be considered to provide civilian security during the transition.

A third possible way forward would be Western powers and Arab states finally coordinating political and military support for the Coalition and the SMC, in an attempt to bolster the possibility that opposition forces could regain momentum. This would enable them to begin to consolidate control over territory, mainly in the north-central and northern regions of the country, eventually giving them political and military capability to negotiate a power-sharing agreement to form the interim government foreseen in the 2012 Geneva agreement. Attempts at such coordination have been made, unsuccessfully, for the past year.

Finally, representatives of Syrian opposition forces -- and other observers -- argue that a successful political solution to the conflict is impossible without outside military intervention to weaken or defeat the Assad regime. Such military actions could range from targeted missile strikes on Assad's air force, to humanitarian corridors, to no-fly zones in the north or the south. Outside intervention could enable the opposition military forces to regain momentum and give the Coalition leverage in negotiations with the Assad regime.

The Geneva negotiations take on heightened importance because alternatives seem worse. Chances of success in Geneva could be enhanced by intensified diplomatic work with Russia and Iran, coordinated action among outside supporters of the opposition and the regime, renewed attempts to consolidate support for the opposition, or -- as a last resort -- military action.

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