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A strategy to rescue diplomacy on Syria

By Mona Yacoubian

Executive summary

The Syrian crisis is rapidly turning into a humanitarian and security nightmare with regional and possibly global implications. The conflict is now firmly entrenched in a military stalemate. While "stalemate" conveys a sense of stasis, the impasse translates into the deepening deterioration of conditions on the ground. Meanwhile, the supercharged sectarian dynamic emanating from Syria is severely threatening regional stability, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, which have both witnessed significant increases in sectarian violence.

The conflict's severity underscores that neither a disavowal of diplomacy nor its failure are options, yet the Geneva II process is faltering badly. If it fails, the conflict's partisans and their external patrons will likely default to escalation and increased militarisation.

To avoid the collapse of diplomacy, the United Nations, together with the U.S. and Russia, should broaden the Geneva process by initiating parallel regional talks. This "outside in" strategy would focus on the twin goals of de-escalation and humanitarian relief. The talks would include regional actors, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, and would focus on building regional consensus around shared issues of concern. These talks would establish three working groups to address mounting sectarian tensions, the provision of unfettered humanitarian access and the need to raise significant resources for humanitarian assistance.

Current assessment of the conflict

As the third anniversary of its outbreak approaches, the Syrian crisis is rapidly transforming into a humanitarian and security nightmare with regional and possibly global implications. Having turned into a sectarian civil war, the conflict is now firmly entrenched in a military stalemate. The regime has consolidated control over some key areas, but the north and east remain largely beyond government control. Rival armed groups vie for dominance in these areas, with extremists gaining greater traction. Foreign fighters are increasingly flowing into Syria, which now surpasses both Iraq and Afghanistan as a jihadist magnet. Under these circumstances neither the regime nor the opposition is likely to prevail in the short to medium term and emerge victorious.

While the notion of "stalemate" conveys a sense of stasis, the impasse translates into the deepening deterioration of conditions on the ground, effectively leading Syria to ruin. Civilians are largely caught in the middle of the conflict at tremendous human cost. Death toll estimates have surpassed 130,000. The conflict has displaced 9.5 million people, more than 40% of Syria's population. Refugee flows have increased, with more than 2.5 million Syrians seeking haven outside the country. More than half the population is in need of humanitarian assistance, with an estimated 9,000 Syrians falling below the absolute poverty line *daily.* Syria's infrastructure has been badly damaged, with 60% of hospitals destroyed or damaged and 1.5 million homes demolished. At this rate, Syria, once a solidly middle-income country, is spiralling downward toward becoming on a par with Somalia.

The supercharged sectarian dynamic emanating from Syria is severely threatening regional stability, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, which have both witnessed significant sectarian spillover. Violence in Iraq in 2013 was the worst in five years, with 9,000 Iraqis killed. In January 2014 approximately 1,000 perished in sectarian violence. Moreover, the transnational jihadist group the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham made unprecedented gains in western Iraq, feeding off its growing presence in Syria. Lebanon has also experienced mounting violence, with tit-for-tat bombings and assassinations. Meanwhile, Sunni extremists are challenging the Shia militant group Hizbullah in what appears to be a growing al-Qaeda-Hizbullah shadow war.

Faltering state of Geneva II

The Syrian conflict's severity underscores that neither a disavowal of diplomacy nor its failure are options, yet the Geneva II process is faltering badly. After two rounds of discussions the talks have failed to yield any significant success. While a sporadic ceasefire in Homs allowed for the evacuation of 1,400 Syrian civilians and the very limited delivery of aid to the Old City, Syria's needs far eclipse such limited progress. More concerning, the two parties are extremely far apart in their view of the purpose of the talks, let alone of attempts to bridge differences. The Syrian government in particular is intransigent in its refusal to address calls for a transitional government as stipulated by the Geneva Communiqué (which forms the basis for the talks). In essence, three factors – a weak opposition, powerful spoilers on the ground, and a brutal regime bent on victory at all costs – suggest dim prospects for Geneva II's success. While a third round was announced, no date has been set, and the talks are in danger of collapsing outright.

With mounting perceptions that the Geneva II process is failing, parties to the conflict and their external patrons will likely default to a position of escalation and increased militarisation on the ground. Typically, the failure of diplomacy is often followed by a significant escalation in violence. This has certainly been the case in Syria.

Saudi Arabia is reportedly promising to send the rebels more sophisticated weaponry. Russia and Iran would likely meet an influx of arms to the opposition with a commensurate or even disproportionate boost to the regime. This escalation will only prolong the conflict. Indeed, research shows that the Syrian conflict's proxy dimension deepens its protracted nature. Similarly, diminishing support by the Syrian protagonists' key patrons could facilitate a dramatic easing of violence and movement toward conflict resolution.

A "Plan B" to rescue diplomacy

With Geneva II faltering, the United Nations (UN), together with the U.S. and Russia, should broaden the Geneva process by initiating parallel regional talks on Syria. Adopting an "outside in" strategy would provide the process with much-needed strategic depth. It would explicitly acknowledge the importance of addressing the proxy dimensions of Syria's deepening conflict. These parallel talks would not be an alternative to Geneva II, but rather an added element meant to strengthen and deepen the process by engaging key regional actors.

If properly framed, these parallel talks would not be an admission of failure, but instead guarantee that the process resumes with a greater likelihood of success. This "outer ring" of negotiations would not include the Syrian protagonists. Rather, these parallel talks would serve to facilitate separate Syrian-to-Syrian political negotiations by addressing pressing concerns that currently impede progress.

The talks would focus on the twin goals of de-escalation and humanitarian relief, specifically seeking to:

(1) reduce mounting sectarian tensions in the region and their proxy dimensions in Syria;
(2) gain unfettered humanitarian access to besieged areas across Syria; and
(3) raise significant resources to fill the UN funding gap for humanitarian assistance to Syria and the most vulnerable of Syria's neighbours.

The talks would bring regional actors (and adversaries) around the table, namely Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Iraq. It would also include Lebanon and Jordan – Syria's neighbours most severely affected by spillover. Together with the UN, Russia and the European Union (EU), these participants would provide the necessary breadth and balance to regional talks, linking global and regional stakeholders. The composition would also reflect a key balancing of both sides of the conflict: the U.S./Russia, Saudi Arabia/Iran, Turkey/Iraq. The UN and the EU would play key facilitating/mediating roles.

Building regional consensus

These parallel talks would focus on building regional consensus around shared issues of concern, especially highlighting the shared benefits of de-escalation. Common threat assessments shared by all parties might include the growing jihadist threat, the perils of a "lost generation" of Syrian youth and the destabilising impact of deepening sectarianism. A shared positive vision could be constructed around the need to assuage civilian suffering on all sides of the conflict and to stave off the spreading humanitarian catastrophe.

Iran could play a critical role. As such, insistence that Iran endorse the Geneva Communiqué should not be a precondition for its participation, since the talks will not deal directly with political transition. Iran and Russia could serve as critical levers to encourage movement by the Syrian regime on key issues. Moreover, bringing Iran into the discussions might illuminate important overlaps of interest between that country and other participants.

Gaining Saudi buy-in presents a more significant diplomatic challenge, particularly if Iran participates. The U.S. will need to play a key role in assuaging Saudi suspicions and convincing the Saudi leadership that a regional conference could be an effective venue for addressing Saudi concerns. The talks could be framed as an important test for Iran to demonstrate its willingness to play a more constructive role in the region. Riyadh views Syria via a "zero sum" sectarian prism, but shared concerns over rising jihadist influence and its regional blowback could provide common ground for discussions with Iran.

After an opening plenary session, the talks would break out into three parallel working groups to generate concrete recommendations for each of the three goals. The most sensitive and challenging working group would focus on reducing sectarian tensions. Merely bringing Iran and Saudi Arabia together would constitute an important start to addressing the core proxy dimensions of the Syrian conflict.

The working group on opening humanitarian access would rely on pressure exerted by patrons of Syrian protagonists – particularly on the government side – to negotiate access. It would capitalise on the February 22nd 2014 UN Security Council resolution demanding humanitarian access in Syria as the basis for developing measures and strategies to ensure access. The working group would also develop options in the event of non-compliance with the UN resolution. Finally, the working group devoted to funding humanitarian needs would be UN directed and seek to dramatically increase the aid contributions of key countries that are not contributing their fair share to UN efforts. It would not only seek to fund the UN's $6.5 billion appeal, but also establish a separate World Bank-administered fund for Lebanon, the most vulnerable of Syria's neighbours.

THE AUTHOR

Mona Yacoubian is senior advisor for Stimson's Middle East programme. Her work focuses on the Arab uprisings, with a particular concentration on Syria, while she has also worked extensively on Lebanon. She previously served as a senior programme officer on the Middle East at the U.S. Institute of Peace. In the 1990s she served as the North Africa analyst at the U.S. State Department. She has an MPA from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and a BA from Duke University.

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