

Talks are only Syrian solution

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It will do nothing to stop the fighting in the short or medium term, but it does reveal a slight shift in the hitherto uncompromising stance of the major Western powers regarding the future of President Bashar al-Assad. Notably absent from Kerry's public comments were his predecessor Hillary Clinton's demands that Assad's departure be a key part of any political transition. The omission was not accidental, but rather an admission that less inflammatory words were necessary before the Russians could support a move towards talks or that Damascus would contemplate attending.

Although the American line has firmed since the meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, it has ceased to make Assad's departure a pre-condition for negotiations. Kerry stated the day after the meeting that "in our judgment, President Assad will not be a component of that transitional government", while Chuck Hagel, the US Defence Secretary, talked about Washington's goal of "helping the people transition to a post-Assad authority". The idea is to make the present US stance hard enough to persuade the opposition to attend, but soft enough to allow the Syrian government to send representatives -- no easy feat.

Such a conference, if it does go ahead, will likely serve the Assad regime's purposes more than it does the opposition's. The Syrian government has remained largely intact, which has allowed Damascus and its allies in Moscow and Tehran to achieve a singularity of purpose that stands in stark contrast to the fractured nature of the opposition and the lack of unity among those calling for the fall of Assad. The Syrian regime will simply need to choose what level of representation it deems appropriate for the conference.

The difficult part of this type of conference, essential as it is, will be the identities of those who would seek to represent the opposition, and the degree of influence they wield among the armed opposition inside Syria. This will put the opposition at a negotiating disadvantage. The former head of the opposition council, Moaz al-Khatib, has warned about "squandering the revolution in international conference halls".

The lack of a universally acknowledged and centralised military command hierarchy also means there are practical limits to what an opposition negotiating team can promise, let alone deliver. The Islamist fighters are a reality on the ground, but their attendance would not be countenanced by the Syrian government or many of the other attendees, while Free Syrian Army commanders publicly at least won't countenance talks with a regime headed by Assad.

As remote as a negotiated solution may appear at the moment, it is the only realistic way to end the increasingly bloody conflict. More than two years after the conflict began, the realisation has set in among the opposition and the regional actors that the Assad regime cannot be removed simply with one last military push. Despite near universal rhetorical, and significant financial and equipment support, competing local and regional interests have conspired to hamstring the rebellion. Too strong to be defeated militarily, but not strong enough to topple the Assad regime, the opposition and the Syrian government have settled into a military stalemate.

Once the opposition militarised the uprising, they miscalculated on two fronts; they overestimated the amount of local support they had and they overestimated the degree of international support they would receive. The first of these miscalculations goes to the nature of Syrian society. A large part of Syria's urban middle class, many of them Sunni, found they had little in common with an armed opposition that was characterised as religious and rural. This same urban population also found it had nothing in common with the foreign Islamist fighters. Most Syrians want political change, but many don't want it to come through the barrel of a gun.

The opposition and many regional states also believed that Washington would adopt a more decisive policy regarding military assistance. But again they have failed to understand that President Barack Obama made his name a decade ago by opposing military intervention in the Middle East, has initiated a "pivot" away from the region, and has been public in his acknowledgment of the limitations of US power. His reluctance to intervene militarily in Syria has been evident from the earliest days and should have come as no surprise to those who understand his philosophy. He is not interested in trying to prise a key Iranian ally from Tehran, as the Gulf states and Turkey want him to do, and he also wants to be certain that US military engagement will make the situation in Syria less, not more, complex.

Neither side in the Syrian civil war believes they are in a weaker bargaining position, but the Syrian military will have been encouraged by some recent tactical successes over rebel forces, by the increasing practical assistance provided by Iran and Hezbollah, and the unwillingness of the US to intervene on the side of the fractious opposition.

It is too early to tell the outcome of the Syrian conflict, but the fact that there is even talk of a conference on the part of Russia and the US is testimony to the fact that both countries believe the situation is best resolved through negotiation, rather than a military victory which appears increasingly elusive for either side.

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