

Why the World Prefers to Wait on Syria

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June 30, 2012



Syria's inner turmoil is intensifying, the Annan plan meant to end the violence is failing, UN observers have suspended their presence there, and the West is showing reluctance to intervene directly. It is against this backdrop that an international ministerial conference on Syria took place in Geneva on Saturday. While seen by some as a new step in international mediation efforts, the talks failed to break new ground.

Indeed, the interim nature of the Geneva talks was underscored by the absence of two key regional powers whose rivalry complicates the Syrian conflict but whose participation will be required at any more substantive peace conference on Syria. These are Iran, which supports the Syrian government, and Saudi Arabia, which backs the Syrian opposition.

In trying to make sense of the Syria talks, it is important to differentiate between two issues that are interrelated but have a life of their own.

One is related to the factors behind the conflict in Syria and the prospects for ending the conflict through a political process. The other concerns the role of external actors, including the UN, the Arab League, the West and Russia, which has kept a relatively low

profile in the Middle East for years but has now found itself back on center stage with Syria.

The conflict has been oscillating between escalation and an asymmetrical stalemate, and the parties in Syria are far from the point where they are exhausted by the violence and ready to search for a genuine political solution. The armed opposition is unlikely to prevail or make radical advances on the ground in the foreseeable future, but it will persist and intensify its efforts. The government, meanwhile, cannot decisively quell the opposition through a combination of the use of force and belated and piecemeal reform. If things continue along the current path, the crisis will be bitter and protracted. The transformation or disintegration of the current power system in Syria, the last minoritarianism republican regime in the Middle East, will take longer than it did elsewhere in the region after the Arab Spring uprisings.

The current combination of insurgency and popular revolt is not new for Syria and has been successfully repressed in the past. What the government could not expect this time was the fallout from the Arab Spring. But even as the Syrian regime faces mounting political, socioeconomic, military and international pressure, it also has specific strengths that can keep it afloat for a long time. For one, the sectarian nature of the ruling class, the armed forces and security services promises to prolong the confrontation. At the same time, the Syrian opposition is divided between relatively secular forces and Islamic fundamentalists, and between actors based at home and abroad.

So as long as the Syrian regime muddles through, it will do so primarily for internal reasons, not because of external support. If and when the regime disintegrates or transforms, it will be the result of a complex combination of weakening institutions, economic collapse, spiraling and increasingly extreme insurgent and counterinsurgent violence and, to some degree, external pressures.

Most external stakeholders, including the United States and Russia, and probably all remaining moderate constituencies within Syria, have a genuine interest in a middle-ground political solution and a more manageable political transition. None of the Geneva mediators are content with the current bloodshed, which has become increasingly intractable, or have any workable plan for dealing with the fallout that could result from the collapse of the present system.

This is why the Annan plan appeared to be an optimal option, not just for Russia but also for other key international players, including the United States. There might have been hopes in some quarters that the time window granted by Annan's plan would allow the situation inside Syria to evolve toward a more decisive outcome, including the possibility of a regime reshuffle. This could have produced more favorable conditions for conflict management without raising the controversial issue of external intervention. But any expectations for a palace coup have proved unrealistic. In particular, the core of the Syrian armed forces and security services is an inseparable part of a tightly integrated ruling caste and is likely to stand by the government until the very end. The fact that the latest round of talks on Syria was expanded to include a call for a national unity government — a demand shared by all participants — provides acknowledgement of this reality.

The Geneva conference was inconclusive apart from suggesting a renewed cease-fire

and broad guidelines for the "Syria-led" process to form a transitional government with the participation of the opposition "by mutual consent." International mediators still have two main options on the table. The first is to further emphasize the international community's united push for intra-Syrian dialogue on the formation of a coalition government and to search for coordinated ways to press and persuade both parties to negotiate while refraining from dictating the composition of that arrangement. This is the option presently supported by Russia. In a way, this strategy builds on the logic of the Annan plan: It buys more time in the hope that an internal shift in Syria's government or a change in the international context will allow for a solution that does not involve external military intervention.

The other option, favored by the United States and its Western and Gulf allies, is to try to dictate the revamp of the regime from the outside — but with few means to reinforce it. Also, in contrast to Libya, Syria's "smart authoritarianism" system is not completely conditioned on the personality of President Bashar Assad or even his clan but is run by a sectarian ruling caste. Sidelining or replacing Assad would be symbolically important, but it would not transform the ruling caste. Interestingly, this may imply that Assad, as a relatively weak figure, might at some point be spared even by his own caste on the condition that the ruling group is left largely intact. Hopes to gradually marginalize hard-liners in the ruling minoritarian group and in the ranks of the opposition ignore the fact that power and moderation do not go hand in hand in today's or tomorrow's Syria — with or without Assad.

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