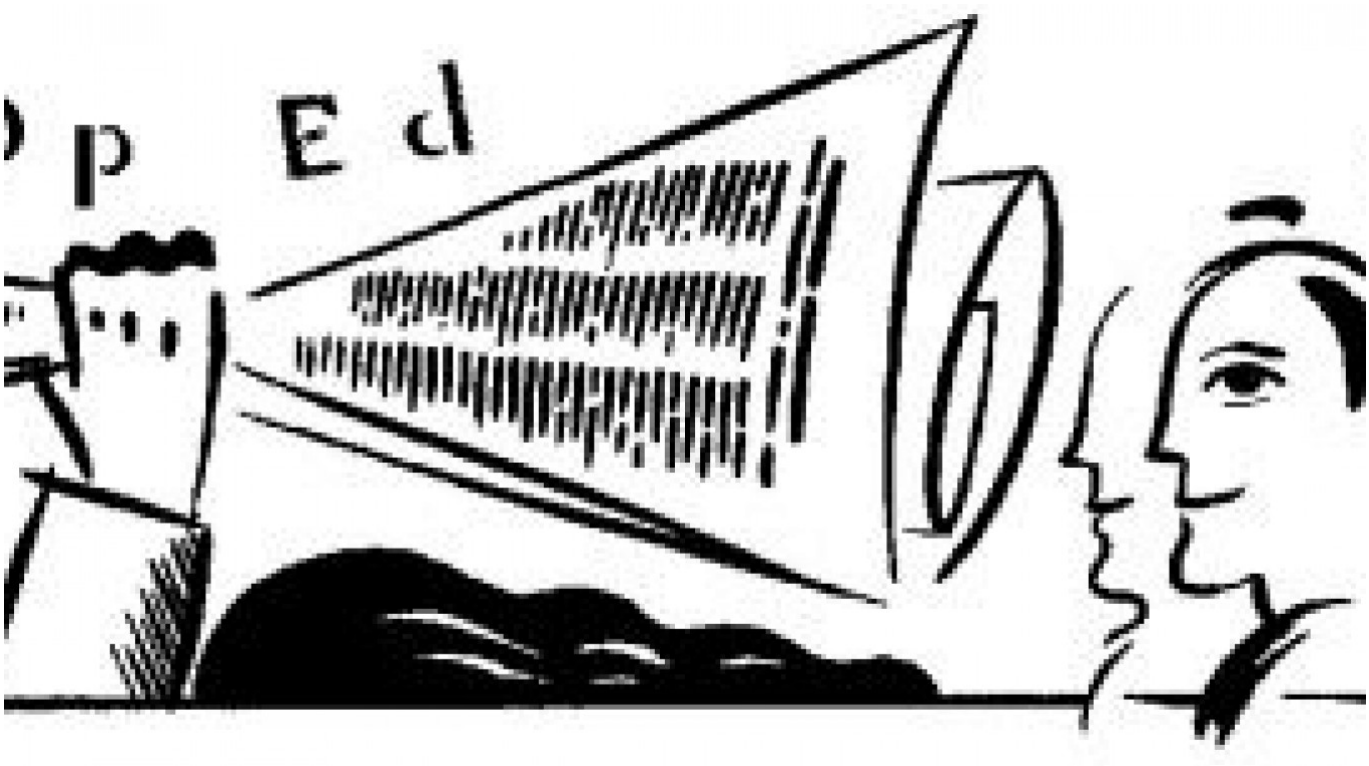
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How the U.S. and Russia Can Solve Syrian Conflict

By Gareth Evans

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The proposal by the U.S. and Russia to hold a diplomatic conference to end the carnage in Syria deserves a less skeptical reaction than it has received. While it will be difficult to get all of the relevant parties to the table in Geneva any time soon, much less to ensure an outcome that will stick, diplomacy is the only game left. As much as one might wish otherwise, every other policy option canvassed so far is wrong in principle, nonviable in practice, unlikely to be effective or bound to increase rather than diminish suffering.

After two years of civil war with no decisive military victory by either side in sight, the situation could not be more desperate. According to current United Nations estimates, more than 80,000 Syrians are dead, and 6.8 million — one-third of the country's population — need urgent humanitarian assistance. Some 4.25 million Syrians are displaced internally, and more than 1.5 million have fled the country, sheltering as refugees mainly in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

The strain on Syria's neighbors is immense, and the conflict is inexorably seeping into the

wider region. Both government and rebel forces have committed atrocity crimes. Many more are feared as violence among the main sectarian groups escalates.

Continued international paralysis is indefensible. Inaction would ignite fires throughout the Middle East and would violate the international community's now-accepted responsibility to protect, through timely and decisive collective action, populations at risk of genocide, ethnic cleansing and other major crimes against humanity and war crimes.

That principle, unanimously agreed by the UN General Assembly in 2005, has been successfully invoked elsewhere, including in support of diplomatic intervention in Kenya in 2008. It also underpinned Security Council-mandated military interventions in Libya and Cote d'Ivoire in 2011 and, more recently, in Mali. But how can it be applied to the mess now in Syria?

The most immediate need, about which there should be little controversy, is massive humanitarian assistance. Delivery problems abound in the war zones but not everywhere. Yet international donors are dragging their feet both in meeting existing commitments and in making new ones. All the aid in the world won't stop the killing.

It is too late now for nonmilitary tools of coercion to have much effect, although Security Council threats of International Criminal Court prosecution for atrocity crimes, including the use of chemical weapons, must remain on the table.

But what of the military-response options still strongly favored by many policymakers and pundits? The trouble is that every tray in this toolkit, too, is empty.

Direct military intervention to overthrow Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime would never win Security Council approval and has no volunteers anyway among capable military powers. In most cases, this is because of the political and military risks involved, rather than the legal indefensibility of acting outside the UN Charter. A less partisan intervention — pouring in troops and airpower to separate the warring parties forcibly — also has no takers, no likely UN authority and only marginal hope of causing less harm than it would be intended to avoid.

There are many more enthusiasts for a more calibrated military intervention, designed to establish one or more no-fly zones and maybe safe havens and humanitarian corridors on the ground. In the early days of the crisis, it was argued that, given the strength of the regime's air defenses and ground forces, even these limited objectives could not be achieved without fighting an all-out war— and thus causing a net increase in human suffering.

With most of the country now ablaze, this argument is less convincing. But it remains the case that there are no obvious takers for a military role. This is partly because of the scale, difficulty, and risk of the commitment required, and partly because of the likely political and legal costs, given the minimal prospect of Security Council endorsement.

Britain and France are pressing hard for indirect military intervention: Supplying arms to approved groups of rebels, in their view, would be a low-cost, low-risk, potentially high-return option. And the European Union has now lifted its ban. But the U.S. is rightly cautious: A troubling proportion of the opposition forces are Islamic extremists, and there is no guarantee that weapons deliveries will stay out of their hands.

More broadly, increases in the supply of weapons funneled to rebel forces by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and others have correlated with surges in the civilian death toll, suggesting that they cost more lives than they save — and with no evident strategic gains. The Assad regime, with its own external supporters, seems likely to have no difficulty matching any new hardware thrown at it.

If the rationale for arming the opposition is not so much to win the war as to weaken the government's resistance to negotiation, it is arguable that the elements of a "hurting stalemate" are already in place with more weapons likely to produce nothing but more fighting and more casualties. The pressure that has always mattered most for the Assad regime is that capable of being applied by Russia.

What is new and encouraging about the events of the last month is that Russia has found enough common ground with the U.S. — in their mutual anxiety about the rising influence of radical Islam in an increasingly fragmented and volatile region — to be prepared at last to do some squeezing.

Painful concessions will be required from both sides if the Geneva conference is even to convene, let alone reach agreement on a cease-fire and transitional administration. It is encouraging that the U.S., following talks between Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, seems prepared to accept a role for senior Assad regime members in any settlement, and that constructive proposals are starting to emerge from at least some opposition quarters.

Compromise can be anathema for purists, but it has always been the stuff of which peace is made. It has never been more necessary than it is now in Syria.

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