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Failure of Syria Diplomacy Exposes Enduring Divisions Over Assad

By The Moscow Times

September 07, 2015



Syria's President Bashar al-Assad answers questions during an interview with al-Manar's journalist Amro Nassef, in Damascus, Syria.

While the desperate flight of Syrians from their country's war was dominating news bulletins this summer, yet another diplomatic push to end the four-year-old conflict was quietly running into the sand.

That largely unnoticed failure has reinforced the view amongst Syria experts that there is no solution in sight, with one of the biggest obstacles a seemingly unbridgeable international divide over Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's future.

As a consequence, Syria looks set for ever greater fragmentation into a patchwork of territories, one of them the diminishing Damascus-based state where Assad appears

confident of survival with backing from his Russian and Iranian allies.

While some Western officials say even Assad's allies now recognize he cannot win back and stabilize Syria, Moscow is setting out its case for supporting him in ever more forthright terms.

Russia's foreign minister in recent days reiterated the Russian view that Assad is a legitimate leader, slammed the U.S. position to the contrary as "counterproductive," and likened the West's approach to Syria to its failures in Iraq and Libya.

Russia meanwhile continues to supply Assad with weapons.

A Syrian military official told Reuters there has recently been a "big shift" in Russian military support, including new weapons and training.

"Our ties are always developing but in these days a qualitative shift has happened. We call it a qualitative shift in Arabic, which means big," the Syrian official said.

Such assertions are difficult to verify, but U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry expressed his concern over reports of increased Russian involvement in a telephone call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Saturday. The New York Times said Russia had sent a military advance team to Syria, citing American intelligence analysts.

Reflecting the logjam over Assad, some of the ideas being tabled for advancing a political process sidestep the question of his future altogether — at least for now, according to a diplomat tracking the conflict.

Yet this remains the biggest single obstacle to breaking a diplomatic impasse around a war whose repercussions are being felt like never before in Europe, which faces a migration crisis fueled by Syrian refugees.

In turn, it is a big complication for efforts to fight the Islamic State group that has flourished in the bloodshed of a conflict that has killed a quarter of a million people and driven another 11 million from their homes.

Despite a U.S.-led bombing campaign against the jihadist group, Islamic State (ISIS) still holds wide areas of Syria and is poised for further moves towards the big, Assad-controlled cities in the west: Islamic State already has a presence in the southern suburbs of Damascus.

"I don't see a tremendous amount of change out of the Iranians or Russians. There is some talk of them being tired, but their positions are pretty firm," said Andrew Tabler, a Middle

East specialist with the Washington Institute.

"They think that Assad's immediate departure would lead to a collapse of the regime. Washington also sees a rapid collapse of the regime as something that would be a boon for ISIS. They are in a conundrum: if Assad goes right away, it would help ISIS, but if he doesn't go at all, you have no hope of putting the pieces of Syria back together again," he said.

"This recent outburst of diplomacy is because everyone was becoming concerned, and rightfully so. But the results of that process were remarkably poor. They seem to cement the earlier political positions of the region when it comes to Syria."

The recent flurry of diplomatic activity followed the conclusion of Iran's nuclear deal with world powers and included high-level meetings between states with a stake in the conflict, with Russia taking the lead.

'Unlimited Support'

Assad has wagered on the West rehabilitating him as a partner in the war against Islamic State. But while the priority for U.S. policy in Syria today is battling Islamic State, not unseating Assad, Washington has stuck by its position that he is part of the problem, saying his brutality has fuelled extremism.

The 49-year-old who assumed power 15 years ago upon the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, has shown no appetite for negotiations despite losing more ground to rebels this year and admitting the Syrian army faces a manpower problem.

The military support from backers in Tehran and Moscow has allowed him to absorb the advances by insurgents who, while better equipped than before, still remain mostly defenseless against the Syrian government air strikes.

"So far, there is no real political solution because of the unlimited support from Russia and Iran," said Bashar al-Zoubi, head of one of the biggest rebel groups fighting Assad in southern Syria, speaking to Reuters via Whatsapp from Syria.

Assad, who describes all the groups fighting him as terrorists, has poured cold water on the idea of imminent political progress. In a recent interview, he said the war would only be near its end when states "conspiring against Syria" ceased doing so — a reference to Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

A steady flow of Iranian officials to Damascus has also underlined Tehran's support for an ally who has safeguarded its interests in the Levant in alliance with Lebanon's Hezbollah,

the Iranian-backed group fighting alongside Assad in Syria.

Since concluding its nuclear deal, Iran says it is trying to launch a new push to resolve the Syrian war. But there is no sign of Tehran giving ground on Assad.

No Alternative?

Moscow and Tehran's backing for Assad is underpinned by the fact they see no alternative who can guarantee their interests.

While Assad may control a fifth or even less of Syria, they still see him as the cornerstone of what remains of the state, including the military and security forces which many Syria experts believe would fragment were he gone.

Russia is pushing for the Syrian government to be included in international efforts to fight Islamic State. Saudi Arabia is one of the states to have rejected the idea.

A senior Russian diplomatic source said: "Proposals by our partners for the change of regime in Damascus are illegitimate. They only say Assad must go — and then what? I don't think they have any idea."

"There used to be no terrorists in Iraq, the same in Libya. And now the Libyan state has fallen apart and the terrorists are roaming there."

The new U.S. special envoy for Syria, Michael Ratney, gave the polar opposite view after his Aug. 28 visit to Moscow.

"We are cognizant that Assad's continued tenure fuels extremism and inflames tensions in the region. That is why a political transition is not only necessary for the good of the people of Syria, but an important part of the fight to defeat the extremists," a U.S. statement said.

While insisting Assad must go, U.S. officials are not specific about when or how. That leaves open the possibility of a transition that begins with him still in office — an almost impossible sell to the rebels fighting him. In any case, Russia has rejected the idea of any pre-negotiated exit for Assad.

In comments closest in weeks to outlining what Moscow might see as an acceptable way forward on dealing with Assad, Russia said on Friday the Syrian president was ready to hold early parliamentary elections and share power with moderate opposition.

The U.N. mediator for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has invited warring parties to take part in UN-led working groups to address matters including political and constitutional issues, and military and security issues.

One of the big complications he faces is dealing with the vast number of rebel factions. While some are getting better organized on the political front, disunity in opposition ranks is still seen as a major challenge to the diplomatic track.

A Western diplomat tracking the conflict said de Mistura's plan would be "very slow." "At the moment no one is talking about [Assad] departing or not."

"The Syrians are loving it ... Damascus is calm."

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