



## ARTICLE

# Obstacles to a Syrian peace: the interference of interests

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**Abstract** Syria's peaceful revolution for dignity and democracy turned into a brutal civil war when the regime of Bashir al-Assad continued to commit atrocities against its people. Since then the war has become complicated, involving jihadist groups, regional actors and the international community. This article outlines the difficulties of creating a peace process for Syria, given not only the opposing interests of the groups at war, but also those of the international community. Two models for peace negotiations, those of Palestine and Sudan, are then analysed as possible paths for the Syrian negotiations. While it should be remembered that the war is a result of a call for dignity, an outcome that does not appease Iran, Turkey, Russia, the West and Saudi Arabia will simply be impossible to achieve.

**Keywords** Syria | Peace agreement | Russia | Iran | The West | Turkey | Local level

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## Introduction

The fifth anniversary of the Syrian revolution last March did not have much to celebrate—nothing at all really. The peaceful protests, once filled with hope, have been replaced by a brutal civil war with a much-hated dictator still in his seat and a country in ruins. Millions of people have been internally displaced or have fled the country, and thousands have been murdered or tortured, including children. Syria's infrastructure is in tatters and a whole generation has been lost.

Syria's war has not remained an in-country war, but has had an impact on the region, as well as on Europe and the world. The flow of millions of refugees risks destabilising the already-prone-to-conflict region and feeds the rhetoric of far-right parties in Europe, creating a hostile environment for the refugees arriving there. Furthermore, Islamic State (IS) has seized the opportunity to conquer patches of territory and spread fear and terror in the region and further afield. Old conflicts have reappeared, with Turkey being distrustful of the Kurdish involvement in fighting IS, and Iran and Saudi Arabia fighting a proxy war over religious hegemony.

The involvement of superpowers such as the US and Russia, and also the EU, supporting one or another faction in the civil war may complicate the process of ending the war and make it even more difficult to find a peaceful solution. This article looks into how the Syrian war has developed, the involvement of the international community and regional powers, and what efforts could be made to build peace.

## From peace to war: towards a global conflict

Two months after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad declared that 'he considered Syria immune to the revolutions' (Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies and Syrian Expert House 2013, 41), peaceful protests broke out in the streets of Deraa. Fed up with the humiliation of the state's repression and encouraged by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the citizens of Syria called for dignity, liberty and democracy. The regime struck back violently against the peaceful protests, using heavy weapons and tanks against civilians, and has continued to commit atrocities since. Many army officials refused to take part in the crack-downs and deserted to form the Western-backed Free Syrian Army. When Assad refused to step down and start the process of political transition, they explicitly pledged to free Syria from the Assad regime. Consequently, Syrian society was polarised between pro- and anti-Assad groups ready to fight each other; the Syrian revolution had reached a point of no return, after which the conflict could only be solved militarily (Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies and Syrian Expert House 2013, 42).

Since then, many armed groups, such as the secular Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), have appeared to fight against the Assad regime. So too have Islamist groups, such as the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Al Nusra, the Turkey- and Saudi-backed Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham (both considered

terrorist organisations by Russia and Iran) (Wood 2016), and IS. Furthermore, the secular factions have also fought against IS, but when Russian air strikes targeted their troops, the Free Syrian Army had no choice but to cooperate with the Islamist factions in order to withstand the increased governmental attacks.

The war in Syria cannot be seen as black and white. It is no longer merely a war between a dictator and its citizens, but has also become a war between Sunni and Shia, and between moderates and radicals. Many of the violent actors are also seen as saviours. For example, IS has provided security for some of the families of deserters—the Assad regime has been known to torture or even kill members of the families of those who desert from the Syrian army. Some of these groups are backed by Iran or Saudi Arabia, and others by Western powers such as the US.

The ambivalent reaction from the international community has contributed to the humanitarian crisis. Millions of people have fled the country or have been internally displaced. Thousands have been tortured or killed, or are missing. The massive flow of refugees has spilled into neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey—and also into Europe, where it has caused turmoil among the member states and is affecting the highly cherished concepts of freedom of movement and open borders.

This crisis will not disappear without international involvement—it is more likely to fester and create more problems. Due to its strong security apparatus, the Assad regime has been able to hold on to power for much longer than its counterparts in the region. The opposition is fractured into many factions. Some are armed; some are not. Some receive support from the West, Russia and/or Turkey, as the case may be. Others have been rejected by one or more of these same three entities. Radical Islamist groups have arisen, and Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda have also contributed to the destabilisation. Finally, the chaos in the region has allowed IS to rise up and create fear, while conquering large swathes of territory.

The insistence by all factions that Assad should step down will not solve the political crisis that is part of the war. The toppling of a dictator does not per se create a democracy, as has been seen in Libya, as state institutions need to be built in order to sustain a democratic system. The demand for removal is a legitimate one, but it needs to be accompanied by much more action aimed at securing peace.

## Why is peace so hard to achieve?

Currently, both sides are convinced that they can win. With Russia's support Assad has been able to win back important pieces of territory, but the moderate rebels have not given up. However, a stalemate would not automatically lead to peace. What is more likely is that the conflict would be left unresolved, increasing the probability of hot spots flaring up. Why is it so difficult for the fighting parties to negotiate a peace deal?

A year after the start of the conflict, the UN tried to mediate between the parties to reach an agreement to stop the violence and make peace. The current UN and Arab League Envoy to Syria, Staffan De Mistura held various rounds of negotiations in Geneva, inviting the fighting parties as well as a whole array of other actors. However, there were many problems that arose both prior to and during the negotiations that De Mistura was not able to overcome. First, prior to the start of the round, the parties to the conflict and the international community could not agree on who should sit at the negotiating table. Second, the moderate opposition refused to meet with Assad, as it insisted on a solution which would remove Assad from office. Third, preconditions were demanded, such as a ceasefire and the delivery of humanitarian aid, which De Mistura refused to agree to. Fourth, the parties did not wish to talk to each other, so De Mistura had to settle for shuttle diplomacy back and forth between each room that contained a delegation. As alliances shifted or deals were made, some groups were allowed into the next round of negotiations while others' invitations were suddenly withdrawn. In the meantime, the presence of various international actors complicated the scene (Rozen 2016).

## A Russian curve ball

At the point when the Syrian regime was losing more territory to either IS or the moderate armed opposition, Assad invited Russia to join its fight against IS. The proclaimed intention of this invitation turned out to be false, as Russia equally bombed territory controlled by the moderate opposition, and even civilian targets, such as hospitals. Russia saved Assad from defeat and handed the lead in the conflict back to him (Birnbau and Naylor 2016). However, to everyone's surprise, on 14 March 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin pulled back the majority of his troops, stating that 'Moscow had succeeded in enabling Syrian government forces and their allies to turn the tide of the conflict in favor of the regime' (Salih 2016). This withdrawal also put Assad in his place, showing him that Putin holds all the cards. Just prior to this, in February, the US and Russia had brokered a cessation of hostilities which has enabled the parties to work towards a viable negotiation round. While the cessation is not a ceasefire (which would require monitoring and should aim to avoid a frozen conflict), the violence in the country has fallen by 90 % (CBS News 2016). However, the cessation is not based on a fundamental agreement to work towards peace, but is a deal between two external powers, and is therefore unsustainable. It has also ensured a strong position for Russia at the negotiating table, and has secured a place for Assad too. For Putin it seems important that the negotiations succeed, otherwise he may have to send his troops back in (Gulf Times 2016). As always, it is difficult to foresee, or even to understand, what Putin's strategy is, as he has many curve balls up his sleeve. Putin's zero-sum games seem to suit him much better than they suit the West, which is not willing to play such high-stakes games.

## Everyone wants a piece

Unlike Russia and Iran, the West has from the beginning called for the removal of Assad, in addition to calling for a moderate opposition. This changed after US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov in December 2015. In a subsequent statement, Kerry said that ‘Assad can stay’, but three days later US President Barack Obama reversed that announcement, saying ‘Assad must go’ (McAdams 2015). This painfully highlights Putin’s influence and mastery of diplomacy. But so far the West has not undertaken any military action against Assad’s troops. Without a mandate this would be difficult to do, but the US has provided military assistance to moderate opposition groups, and has ordered air strikes against IS in Syria as part of an international coalition. The aim of these air strikes was primarily to destroy IS, but they also brought relief to the moderate opposition, which was taking fire from Assad’s army and IS, and later from Russia as well. Meanwhile, the EU has abstained from military involvement and has focused on providing humanitarian assistance instead. However, individual member states such as the UK and France have carried out air strikes against IS.

The Turkish government has a lot to gain and a lot to lose in the Syrian conflict. The millions of refugees that have come from Syria have caused problems in Southern Turkey, but have simultaneously put Turkey in a position of power, especially vis-à-vis the EU. However, the rise of armed Kurdish groups that are supporting the West’s fight against IS—and quite successfully so—has worried President Erdoğan. He fears that the Kurds will use the opportunity to claim autonomy from Turkey. As a result he has started an offensive against the YPG, which has brought Southern Turkey to the verge of civil war. This fear has also been seen through Erdoğan’s rejection of a place at the negotiating table for the Democratic Union Party, the political branch of the YPG, which is supported by Russia and the US. And let us not forget the row between Turkey and Russia over the violation of Turkish airspace by Russian strike fighters. All in all, alliances are under a lot of pressure and events are changing relationships quickly.

The big question is why Assad, instead of turning to Russia, did not turn to Iran for military support. Iran has been a close and long-term strategic ally of Assad, and sees the survival of Assad as vital for its own regional interests. It has covertly supported the regime via Hezbollah, and has also openly supported it with logistical, technical and financial support (Lake 2015). Iran’s involvement adds fuel to the Sunni–Shia conflict.

While it could be interpreted that the engagement of so many actors highlights the real concern for Syria’s people and for reaching a peace agreement, *realpolitik* remains everyone’s main policy, and all these strong international and regional powers are merely aiming to ensure their own interests are protected.

## Building peace: where to start?

The war has destroyed Syria in all ways possible: its elite has left, its institutional and transport infrastructures are ruined; the economy is in tatters; large parts of its population are internally displaced or have fled the country, with thousands of citizens dead; and a generation has grown up in war and resentment. The Syrian situation remains extremely dangerous and volatile, and has had an enormous impact on many people and governments, both in the region and in Europe too. If nothing is done, Syria may become a frozen conflict, or, worse, remain a hot war. Proponents of military intervention by the West do not want to ‘wait and see’ any longer, but, as in Iraq, this could result in a long-dreaded military presence without a clear security guarantee—especially since the international community is so divided regarding not only intervention but also Syria’s future. With all this in mind, a political solution should be preferred in order to prevent more bloodshed in this war-torn land. What could Syria look like after a peace settlement, and how can such a peace be arranged?

A political solution also requires peace, but building peace in Syria is thwarted by several factors. First, it should not be forgotten that the war originated as a peaceful call for freedom by the people against their dictator, and that everything since has been a seized opportunity or an escalation of events. Second, reaching a peace agreement is an extremely difficult exercise as there are no longer just two opposing parties involved that need to agree, but a myriad of groups. Figuring out who should sit at the negotiating table and under which conditions is a problem in itself. Third, the road to peace in Syria is filled with those who would wish to spoil it. Their impact needs to be mitigated. These spoilers, which include factions that are not included in the peace talks or that have a counter-productive agenda, could damage the slow and long-term process that will characterise any peace process of this scope. Fourth, the conflicting agendas within the international community and the regional powers fuel divisions rather than bring the negotiating parties together. Furthermore, before any peace talks can start, two preconditions need to have been set in place: the violence needs to be reduced and humanitarian aid should be allowed to reach all those in need of it. The preconditions for an end game, however, may need to remain flexible, as there are too many potential spoilers both within and outside the country.

## What kind of peace for Syria?

In such a complicated environment, where both sides have blood on their hands, it is worth examining a few models of peace negotiations. The Oslo Process, which aimed to agree a deal between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the 1990s could offer an example for settling the Syrian conflict. The Oslo Process aspired to negotiate a peace agreement between just the immediate parties that were at war with each other, excluding those with regional interests; to create mutual recognition of the (two) parties as the legal entities representing each side; to set an interim period to create a space for further negotiations in order to deal with the more complicated issues

later; and lastly, to negotiate in a secret setting. What the Oslo Process failed to do, but which in Syria's case is paramount—and incredibly hard to find—is to negotiate under the leadership of an impartial mediator.

The UN has taken the lead in negotiating peace. Considering the many interests of third parties in the war, the UN could be the only neutral mediator. However, the negotiations so far have been too public. When negotiations are public, especially after the number of deaths involved in this case, it is difficult for the parties to compromise in order to reach an optimal deal. De Mistura's shuttle diplomacy may be useful in one way, but it does not allow the parties to talk to each other and come to terms with each other. This is also complicated by the fact that there are just too many parties at the table, but a deal with fewer groups may undermine the acceptance of a possible peace agreement. Furthermore, the involvement of regional powers and Islamist factions, especially IS, adds fuel to the fire of both the conflict and any peace agreement. The Oslo Process offers a minimum starting point, but needs to be adapted to this specific case.

Another peace model that could serve as an example to draw upon is the negotiations in Sudan, which reached a final agreement in 2005. The situation there featured the following familiar characteristics: parts of the Sudanese army deserted and formed the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the political wing of which later became the ruling party of South Sudan. Furthermore, armed groups both within and outside the country destabilised the region. The peace deal which ended the conflict and split the country into two was made via a set of agreements, tackling one issue, such as power sharing, wealth sharing or security arrangements, at a time. The idea of separating Syria into smaller territories is not new, as it is unlikely that Assad will be able to regain power across all of Syria's territory. However, it remains unclear on which criteria any division should be based. The population, and even more so since the major internal displacement of people has taken place, cannot be easily divided along sectarian lines, which could have offered a natural division, as was the case in Sudan. While a federation could be a viable solution to Syria's conflict, it also poses the threat that territories could be controlled by IS or war lords holding their peace in exchange for their own pieces of territory, restricting the freedom of movement necessary for economic prosperity. The far-reaching influences of Iran and Saudi Arabia, armed or otherwise, are a destabilising factor that also needs to be taken into account, as does the presence of IS. As there are many issues to solve in Syria too, a partitioned peace agreement could be helpful in moving towards a final peace settlement.

## Including the Syrian people

Mapping all the key players with their interests and issues and bringing all of them together in various groupings to find a solution may be the first thing to do to prepare the ground for a peace agreement. It is imperative that all key interests are addressed in the process, because otherwise further conflicts may flare up immediately after the settlement.

While the first layer—a deal between Assad and the armed opposition—and the second layer—appeasing the regional actors—are very important, a peace settlement will only work if the population is also on board. When discussing peace deals, not enough is heard about the third layer: the Syrian population. In the end, it is these people that need to live next to their neighbours, who may have been supportive of the ‘other’ side. Subnational tensions may be more influential than has been given consideration. Since national authority has been weakened, and local and tribal structures have always been strong in Syria, brokering an agreement on the national level alone could turn out to have less of an impact on stability than if the other levels are included too.

A Syrian–Syrian dialogue with all civil society organisations included is essential, as these organisations work on the local level, and can negotiate on behalf of the citizens. The international peace talks give visibility to the resolution of the Syrian conflict and offer important leverage, but the real work is always done behind the scenes. So far, the international community has placed too little importance on such a dialogue.

## Conclusion

It should not be forgotten that the war started as a call for liberty, dignity and democracy, and that a peace deal should also include mention of a political transition (leaving aside whether Assad should or should not be part of this). Now is also the time to look beyond the moment of peace—even at times when peace seems impossible. Initially, it is the Syrians that need to come to terms with each other. The international community can only play the role of shepherds or guarantors of peace. However, due to the complexity of the war, appeasing the many actors involved has become important too. The negotiations, therefore, should be all-inclusive so that they can address the second-order problems, such as IS, and regional issues, such as minorities. Too much trust may have been placed in those in the leading roles, the US and Russia.

The international community has not yet done all it can. It should continue to provide much-needed humanitarian assistance, but it may also have to consider acting more forcefully. If it does nothing, the state of Syria will be pulverised and terrorist groups will rule as war lords. It all comes down to answering these questions: what kind of future does the international community see for Syria? How badly does the international community want to see peace in Syria? And what is it willing to pay for it?

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