

Enough Talking, Kofi James Traub Foreign Policy 25 May 2012 *James Traub is a fellow of the Center on International Cooperation.*

Fourteen years ago, Kofi Annan, then the U.N. secretary general, embarked on a desperate mission to Baghdad to persuade Saddam Hussein to allow U.N. weapons inspectors back in the country. Miraculously, he succeeded. (...)

Annan is of course in the midst of another such mission, this time as U.N.-Arab League special envoy to Syria, where he has presented a six-point plan to President Bashar al-Assad in the hopes of ending the mass killing of civilians. In recent weeks, Assad had made Annan look like a naïve devotee of peace-at-any-price by first accepting the plan and then systematically trampling on its terms. And then, last Friday, government forces and local militias systematically slaughtered more than 100 civilians, most of them women and children, in Houla, a group of villages in the province of Homs, proving beyond any doubt that Assad has been cynically using Annan to buy time for his own plan, which is to kill and terrorize his opponents. The time has come to thank Kofi Annan for his services and send him back home to Geneva. (...)

Annan is no pacifist. In the late 1990s, he championed the doctrine that came to be known as "the **responsibility to protect**," which stipulates that when states fail to act to stop atrocities, other states have an obligation to do so. But Annan does believe that sometime atrocities can be halted, or prevented, with diplomacy rather than with force. (...)

When I asked Ahmad Fawzi, a former U.N. official who serves as the spokesman for the mission in Syria, why Annan was still shuttling between capitals even as Assad's forces continued to shell civilians, he said, "It's the only game in town at the moment." Fawzi made only the most modest claims for the mission's success: Violence goes down while inspectors occupy a given space, though often returns to previous levels once they leave; civilians might "start having faith in the presence of the observers." But it was still better than the alternative -- even more killing.

Houla has vividly demonstrated how very little the 260 or so observers can do to prevent violence where they are not physically present, but the mission grinds on, with another 40 observers still to be added to the force. (...)

The question is: When do you stop pursuing this low-probability game? When, if at all, do the risks of action become greater than the risks of inaction? (...) The United States and the EU

have allowed Annan to decide when and whether his mission has ceased to be useful; but Annan's faith in diplomacy may wind up serving Assad's interests more than those of the Syrian people. (...)

Fawzi says that no Plan B is on offer, but the fact is that an impromptu Plan B appears to be taking shape: Turkey will provide its territory for the training and organization of the Free Syrian Army, the United States will provide logistical and command-and-control assistance, and Gulf states will supply the hardware. Everyone, including Annan and the U.N., will labor mightily to keep the Syrian National Council, the political organ of the opposition, from collapsing into utter chaos, as it now threatens to do, and to persuade the SNC, the rebel army, and the Local Coordinating Committees inside Syria to work together.

We mustn't delude ourselves about Plan B's likelihood of success. The air war that destroyed the Qaddafi regime in Libya was relatively swift and thoroughly decisive, but Libya now teeters on the edge of anarchy. Syria hardly looks more encouraging. (...) Syria poses such a terrible problem because it is not about finding the political will to do the right thing, but rather trying to find some way of doing more good than harm. (...)

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