

For Syria, the civil war is still to come Jeremy Greenstock The Guardian 15 May 2013

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The US and Russia announced plans for a conference on Syria last week. The world can be forgiven for wondering: what use is that? Indeed, what use has any outside activity been on Syria?

Two years ago (...) people ran out of tolerance for the Assad regime's repression. They probably would not have started an armed resistance had the people of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya not set an example. (...) There was little in the way of planning, leadership or organisation. A hundred localities mutinied against the state without any idea of how to replace it.

This is less a classic civil war than a disjointed and (on all sides) brutal uprising. The most capable fighters have come from abroad or represent an extremist minority. The regime is battered, discredited and unacceptable, but unlikely soon to be dislodged by force. It is a destructive and horrific stalemate, which intensified military action offers no real prospect of breaking.

Outside intervention offers no kind of a solution. The past 12 years have shown too many instances of unintended consequences, particularly when the intervener becomes the enemy. Even the delivery of more lethal weaponry to the opposition resolves nothing, because it could end up with the wrong people, and because it allows scope and pretext for the regime's supporters – notably Iran and Russia – to balance it on the other side. (...)

So what can diplomacy do? The courageous efforts of first Kofi Annan and now Lakhdar Brahimi to find a political route through have failed to convince the protagonists. Western and Russian arguments have proved neither wholly right nor wholly wrong – just ineffective.

The basis for a conference approach is threefold. First, it is time to recognise that Syria, because of what and where it is, threatens regional stability: Lebanon and Jordan lie in the immediate path of trouble from the implosion of their neighbour; Israel, Iraq and Turkey will feel the blast. No analyst can predict the consequences of the jihadist involvement in the fighting, but its influence is growing. These are wider international interests that will in time have a greater geopolitical impact. That is why there is a new tone to US-Russian exchanges; and why Israel has decided to risk its dangerous air strikes.

Second, we are not doing enough – for all the brave work of UN agencies and NGOs – to look after the huge numbers of Syrian displaced and dispossessed. They are suffering as much as any population in conflict this century, and are posing acute difficulties to neighbouring states.

But the third reason is perhaps the most compelling. Whether or not the Assad regime falls, there is a civil war in Syria still to come. No obvious successor is in sight, which means a vacuum. Even in Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and Libya, where the vacuums were at least filled by semi-responsible attempts to create government, the chances of disorder are very high. Syria cannot reach even their minimum levels of progress without strong and co-ordinated outside assistance.

The political point of a conference-in-continuity is to create the framework for a solution inside Syria even if the parties ignore it for a while. Exhaustion will inspire alternatives, and time and lives will be saved if those alternatives have been shaped. (...)

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