

Syria's Metastasising Conflicts International Crisis Group 27 June 2013 *International Crisis Group (ICG) released a new report on 27 of June 2013 on Syria's metastasizing conflict.*

Two years, scores of thousands of dead, a mushrooming regional sectarian war and millions of refugees and internally displaced later, the Syrian war is tying the international community in knots largely of its own making. Once confident of swift victory, the opposition's foreign allies shifted to a paradigm dangerously divorced from reality: that military pressure would force the regime to alter its calculus so that it would either negotiate its demise or experience internal cracks leading to its collapse. That discounted the apparent determination of Iran, Hizbollah and Russia to do what it takes to keep the regime afloat and bring the armed opposition to its knees. It counted without the fecklessness of an opposition in exile fighting for a share of power it has yet to achieve. (...) It is past time to get over false hopes and confront a harsh truth. The options that dominate the policy debate would deepen the crisis, not produce a credible exit from it.

If the goal is to end this horrendous war, the choice is between massive Western military intervention – with attending risks and uncertainties – to decisively shift the ground balance; acceptance of regime victory with the moral and political price that would entail; and a diplomatic solution driven jointly by the U.S. and Russia. The latter is the preferred but today illusory option, in which regime and opposition would settle for a less-than-satisfactory power-sharing agreement, and the region's main rival camps (led, respectively, by Iran and Saudi Arabia) would acquiesce in a Syria aligned with neither. A fourth option – in which allies give both sides enough to survive but not prevail – would perpetuate a proxy war with Syrians as primary victims. It is the present stage and the likeliest forecast for the foreseeable future.

For now, the focus should be on immediate steps to de-escalate the conflict and on mapping out in more detail an endgame that could serve as the basis for a diplomatic settlement. (...) This report suggests ideas for further discussion. (...)

What is to be done? Already overdue is to vastly increase humanitarian aid within Syria, whether in regime- or opposition-held territory. There is need, too, for a "periphery" strategy for avoiding instability in vulnerable neighbours: giving economic help to Jordan and Lebanon and the refugees they host; prevailing upon regional countries not to further incite sectarian tensions in Lebanon; pressing Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki to adopt a far more inclusive policy toward his Sunni opposition.

Hardest of all is what to do about Syria. The priority should be to end the war; there are no easy choices, but there is at least need to face them squarely:

- One option would be for the West to decisively tip the military balance. This, it almost certainly can do – albeit only by a far more massive intervention than is presently contemplated or, arguably, politically palatable. Even then, it is not clear whether the regime would be

“defeated”, or merely reincarnated in a series of militias, and even less clear whether the war would be ended or only redefined. Iran, Hizbollah, perhaps even Russia would keep influence, fuel instability and ensure a chaotic transition (Tehran and the Shiite movement have elsewhere proved to be masters at this game), and the regional/sectarian Cold War would endure.

- An arguably most expedient way to tamp down violence would be to starve the rebels of resources, acquiesce in de facto regime victory and seek an accommodation with Bashar. The moral, political and strategic costs would be huge, perhaps prohibitive, and it might well not end the tragedy: enraged Syrians likely would not surrender; an emboldened regime might seek revenge; and Damascus almost certainly would refrain from the domestic or foreign policy concessions necessary for its external enemies to save face.

- The optimal solution – a negotiated, diplomatic one – at this stage belongs pretty much to the world of make-believe. Outside powers – beginning with Russia and the U.S. – would have to fundamentally shift their endgame approach. For Moscow, this means accepting, then pushing for a major transformation of the Syrian power structure; for Washington, it entails moving from implicit regime change to explicit power sharing. Any viable negotiated political outcome would have to empower and reassure Syria's various constituencies. Regional actors, who will support a compromise only if they believe the new political framework gives them sufficient leverage to preserve their core interests, would need guarantees. The West's apparent determination to exclude Iran from a peace conference (perhaps under review in the wake of that country's presidential elections) is short-sighted: keeping Tehran from Geneva will not lessen its role in Damascus.

The West's current trajectory – urging diplomacy while resorting to half-way measures such as arming the opposition or, conceivably in the future, targeted airstrikes and a limited no-fly zone – is an option as well, and one that might produce sizeable ancillary benefits: eroding the regime's military; boosting Western influence over the rebels; and recalibrating the balance of power among rebel groups. But it would not produce what its promoters typically claim as justification: moving the regime to seriously negotiate a genuine transition. Nor is there any reason to believe it could arrest sectarian polarisation, contain violence, limit jihadi groups or persuade Syria's allies to back down. Ultimately, it would mean getting further sucked into a dangerously intensifying and malignant Sunni/Shiite sectarian regional conflict in which the West would be running a risk by picking favourites.

If Russia and the U.S. wish to signal seriousness, they should start with efforts to de-escalate the conflict. Moscow should press the regime to end the most gratuitous forms of violence (notably massacres of civilians in the presence of army troops and use of ballistic missiles against civilians) and curtail the use of its foreign fighters (especially those of an overtly sectarian nature). Washington should push the opposition to act against its own most extreme armed groups and implement ceasefires along specified front lines. None of this would fundamentally alter the trajectory of the conflict or truly point to its resolution. But at least it would be a start, which is far more than one can say has been achieved at this sorry stage.

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