

# Peacemaking in Syria: Barriers and Opportunities

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## **About the author**

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## Introduction

One of the worst political and humanitarian crises since the Second World War, the civil war in Syria has caused more than 200,000 deaths, displaced half of the country's population, and effectively re-drawn the demographic map of the Levant, possibly for generations to come. At the crossroads of regional rivalries, marred by mutual intransigence, and defined by hardening sectarianism, the Syrian crisis presents prospective mediators with a tough test, repeatedly described as a "mission impossible". Mediation by the Arab League and the United Nations over the last years has failed to find common ground between the Syrian regime and the forces opposing it. As we enter 2015, new mediation initiatives by the United Nations and Russia are underway, but the question is whether these will come up against the barriers that derailed earlier attempts, or if the rise of the Islamic State has shifted the political equation so that new possibilities may emerge.

This brief describes past and ongoing mediation attempts, analyzes the reasons behind their failure, and discusses the prospects of mediation in light of the current political landscape.

It identifies four key barriers to past mediation in Syria:

- Mutual optimism about military prospects. Betting on battlefield victories or holding out for a foreign intervention, neither side engaged genuinely with negotiations.
- Fragmentation and infighting on the rebel side undermined its ability to negotiate and credibly commit to ceasefires.
- Hardening religious fault lines fueled Shia-Sunni mistrust, complicating peace deals that depend on sectarian co-existence.
- Disunity in international fora about how to approach the crisis.

While the prospects for mediation remain bleak, emerging shifts may provide possible openings for new efforts:

- Increasing war-weariness on both sides, as regime struggles to fill its ranks and people flee rebel-held areas. Political pressure from below may incentivize conciliation.
- Rebel consolidation and emergence of ethnic statelets may allow for localized bargaining.
- The rise of the Islamic State may galvanize the international community. There are signs of growing pragmatism among mediators, including the UN, and of a rapprochement between United States and Russia over Syria.

## A succession of mediation attempts

The first serious peacemaking effort in Syria was undertaken by the Arab League, the most important regional organization in the Middle East. A few months after violence first erupted in the spring of 2011, the League dispatched its Secretary General, Nabil al-Arabi, to seek de-escalation. While al-Arabi was received by Assad, the regime mistrusted his mediation,

arguing that the League was under the sway of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, active supporters of regime change in Damascus. Instead, the regime stalled, seeking to buy time to engineer the military defeat of the uprising. However, with both violence and international pressure intensifying during the fall, it eventually agreed to the League's plan shortly before Christmas 2011. Military monitors sourced from Arab countries deployed to Syria, but a cease-fire failed to materialize. And within weeks the monitoring mission, mired in controversy and politicking among League member states, withdrew.

The ball was passed to the United Nations, which appointed former Secretary General Kofi Annan as its Syria envoy. Following intensive diplomatic shuttling, Annan managed to broker a cease-fire between the regime and key opposition players in April 2012. Hope flared up, but quickly expired. Despite Annan's prestige and the presence of UN monitors, the cease-fire fell apart within a matter of weeks. This forced a shift in Annan's strategy. Rather than focus on the primary parties, he sought to negotiate a compact among the great powers, primarily the US and Russia, trying to use their leverage to bring the combatants to the table. Meetings in the summer of 2012 produced the outlines of a deal, encapsulated in the Geneva Communiqué, calling for a cessation of violence and a transitional government. An example of what diplomats call "constructive ambiguity", the communiqué left a key sticking point – the fate of Assad – unspecified. But diverging interpretations soon emerged and, seeing that his plan had few genuine takers, Annan resigned his mission in August 2012.

The UN's efforts continued under the leadership of Lakhdar Brahimi, a senior Algerian diplomat and trouble-shooter, who adopted a cautious, consultative approach. Key components of the Annan plan, including a general cease-fire under international supervision, remained central to the UN efforts under Brahimi. It took more than a year to lure the parties back to the negotiating table, again in Geneva, in the first weeks of 2014. While there was progress on humanitarian issues, such as letting aid into the besieged city of Homs, the talks ended in failure in February 2014, as both sides remained unyielding on key issues. Rebels insisted on Assad's non-participation in any future transitional government; the regime wanted to first fight terrorism. With neither side budging from positions, and the government maintaining a slow military advance at the time, the UN process again faltered.

## **Barriers to resolution in Syria**

So far, Syria has proven resistant to mediation. Some of the world's most experienced mediators have failed. Why? One part of the explanation lies in the way mediators approached the conflict and the means at their disposal. The Arab League's intervention was ham-fisted and rife with political tension. Such ineptitude contributed to wasting the first, and probably best, opportunity to stem the escalating violence. The UN came with more professionalism and resources, but here too, there were coordination problems, management issues, and strategic mistakes. For example, Annan's mediation relied on the faulty premise that a deal struck at the international level could be imposed on the ground inside Syria, with its multitude of actors and coalitions vying for independent influence.

A larger part of the explanation, however, is found in a set of strategic and structural barriers.

First, few, if any, of the involved parties have had a genuine interest in negotiations. The regime believed it could crush the opposition, whereas the opposition, even when suffering from a worsening military position, held out for support from external patrons or, ideally, a foreign military intervention. History shows that mutual optimism about military prospects tends to disfavor earnest negotiations, as both sides anticipate a victory that would make uncomfortable compromises unnecessary. A particular problem in Syria was that early mediation initiatives focused on striking a bargain between the regime and opposition coalitions whose leadership remained in exile. Having little direct skin in the game, elite exiles could cling to untenable bargaining positions while playing a waiting game, in the hope that events would force Syria to develop as per the Libyan template, where military strikes by Western powers tipped the scales.

Second, the opposition has remained fragmented, splintered across territories, clans, and worldviews. A series of attempts to coordinate has done little to change this fact. The consequence is that the opposition has rarely been able to speak with one voice, and hence, neither formulate a common agenda nor credibly commit to uphold a nation-wide cease-fire. Research shows that civil wars with this kind of fragmentation often suffer from spoiler problems: sidelined actors see no benefit in peace and employ violence to sabotage negotiations. The meddling of external sponsors – each favoring groups of their own taste and rarely those patronized by others – has exacerbated these difficulties.

Third, sectarian dimensions, while present from the start, attained increasing saliency with time, as the conflict was cast as one battlefield in the greater rivalry between the two principal denominations of Islam. This has fueled mistrust and cemented essentialist convictions that tend to make negotiation – let alone concessions – difficult. Conflict scholars argue that “religious conflicts are more difficult to settle peacefully than other types of conflicts”<sup>1</sup> and historical data show that, if a participant has religious aims, they are less amenable to entertain negotiated solutions. This is most clearly seen among religious hardliners, such as al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State (ISIS), whose religious convictions favor martial solutions over those based on sectarian co-existence.

Fourth, mediation has been hampered by international disunity. With the exception of the Geneva Communiqué, international negotiations have been marked by the inability of the United States and Russia to join around a common approach. Again and again, such discord has pulled out the rug under UN mediation efforts. The regional neighborhood has been equally unsupportive. Regional rivals – Iran favoring the regime, Gulf countries and Turkey favoring the opposition – have underwritten a steady stream of money and weaponry to shore up their preferred client, thereby perpetuating the fighting.

Until now, these four barriers have placed mediation in Syria beyond the bounds of possibility. As we enter 2015, several of them remain, but there are also signs of hope.

## **The evolution of a mutually hurting stalemate?**

The most promising sign, odd as it may sound, is that the military situation is largely stalemated. The regime has displayed unanticipated resilience and made incremental advances in several areas during 2014, but the opposition, especially Jihadist groups, proved themselves skilled adversaries. No side appears capable of defeating the other, and barring a foreign intervention, a military victory for either side is unlikely to materialize.

While the core of the regime remains resolved and Army generals hyperbolize about future victories, there are evident signs of war exhaustion. Suffering from manpower shortages, the regime has turned to coercive drafting, which has bred discontent, especially among the non-Alawi minorities. With more deaths, higher food prices, and fuel shortages, disgruntlement is on the rise even among those supportive of the regime. Insiders claim that many regime supporters would be willing to consider political settlement. As the costs of war accumulate without apparent progress, such sentiments may bend the regime toward compromise.

Among the opposition, moderates are in decline and may cease to be a relevant player in the Syrian equation. Training programs by external patrons have so far failed to produce a competent and loyal force. Although the ongoing US program is a more serious effort, chances are that it will be too little too late, and that, by the time this force is trained – according to the Pentagon, by the end of 2015 – Jihadist forces are the only opposition show in town.

This means that opposition fragmentation may diminish, but on the other hand, the dominance of Jihadist forces is making sectarianism the leitmotif of the war. Indeed, some analysts, including Syria expert Joshua Landis, talk of an ethnic “sorting out”, as Syrian citizens, threatened by the onslaught of religious hardliners, seek safety in numbers and coalesce with their co-religionists. A hardening of religious identities may make it more difficult to find common ground, but ethnic separation, albeit repulsive as a policy, may help bring about a modicum of stability. As the multiethnic and overlapping demography of pre-war Syria is replaced by one where different groups live in different parts of the country, it is possible that we will see the emergence of de facto mini states, between which bargaining could ensue.

At the international level, the situation remains largely unchanged, characterized by a lack of urgency ill suited to the gravity of the situation. However, there are some positive developments. A rapprochement between US and Russia over Syria is underway and recent signals suggest both are ready for greater pragmatism than in the past. The question of what to do with Assad is outstanding, but given the momentum of the Islamic State and the deficiencies of the moderate opposition, it appears that the US is calculating that the risks of regime change in Syria outweigh the benefits. Rather, with US airstrikes targeting the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front, leaving regime installations intact, we are seeing the emergence of tacit cooperation between Damascus and Washington.

## Whither Syria?

Taken together, the emerging war-weariness, rebel consolidation, and international pragmatism may spell new hopes for peacemaking in the coming year. But severe barriers remain and there is little reason to be optimistic about the recent bout of diplomatic activity, with two parallel initiatives emerging in the last months of 2014.

The first is the latest installment of the UN's ongoing efforts in Syria, now under the leadership of Staffan de Mistura, an Italian-Swedish diplomat who previously headed the UN mission in Iraq. De Mistura's strategy has been to shift from seeking a centrally coordinated, top-down ceasefire, to focus on minor truces mediated between local actors in different places across the country. The goal of such "freezes" is to promote de-escalation and distribution of humanitarian aid.

Devoid of much diplomatic superstructure, Mistura's initiative comes without the political preconditions that scuttled earlier plans: it remains silent on Assad's fate and does not specify any process for reconciliation. The test case is the northern commercial hub of Aleppo, which remains split between warring factions since 2012.

By dropping much of the diplomatic superstructure, the initiative sidelines formal negotiations in favor of a bet on the evolution of tit-for-tat cooperation at the local level. It is a necessary shift to modesty and pragmatism in UN strategy, but it remains a long shot. Mistura is essentially betting that the rise of ISIS has forced the regime and moderate rebels to rethink their position, and that they would be willing to bury the hatchet, at least locally, to focus on the greater evil. But it is far from certain that the regime, on the brink of encircling Aleppo, would want to freeze the conflict on a front where it is making progress. And while recent formation of a rebel coalition in Aleppo, dubbed the Levant Front, may provide the necessary amount of coordination to make a local truce a real possibility, firm commitment to De Mistura's initiative is lacking.

In the event of success in Aleppo, the great challenge will be to make a local cease-fire stick. Mistrust is rife and the risk of spoilers is very real. But experience tells us that localized cooperation can emerge, even without external monitors, if the conditions are right: repeated interaction that allows for trust-building and credible deterrent capabilities on both sides. However, if the UN or other actors in the international community would be willing to offer monitors or peacekeeping forces, the odds would improve, but such interventions are improbable as long as ISIS or al-Nusra remains within striking distance of Aleppo.

In parallel with the UN proposal, Russia has sought to bring Syrian peace talks to Moscow. This is not the first time Russia seeks to play a mediating role in Syria: it put out feelers for consultations both in 2012 and 2013, neither of which took off. The new initiative seemed destined to suffer the same fate: a preparatory meeting held in Moscow in the last days of January 2015 was shunned by large parts of the opposition, including all rebel groups with meaningful military influence. This left attendance to regime representatives and what Aron

Lund, a Syria expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has described as “a skeletal delegation of elderly Russia-friendly leftists and Assad-linked pseudo-dissidents”. They agreed on a set of framework principles and that the process should continue, but absent wider participation by the opposition, a sequel in Moscow will be futile.

As before, the key sticking point for getting the opposition to the table is whether or not the primary agenda item is regime change. A main supporter of the Assad regime, Russia is viewed with suspicion by the opposition side, where many have argued that Russia cannot play the role of honest broker. This will hamper its efforts to get the opposition to the table. If they get there, however, Russia’s pro-regime bias may not necessarily be a disadvantage. Empirical research suggests that biased mediators sometimes perform better than neutral ones, since they can leverage their clients into concessions. Russia has played this role repeatedly in the past and it might be even more willing to lean on Damascus now, with falling oil revenues worsening its economic squeeze, motivating it to downsize foreign engagements. But of course, for such leverage to be meaningful, there needs to be someone on the other side of the bargaining table, and so far, there isn’t.

But even with the participation of only minor opposition players, Russia’s initiative may be a deft political move. It is possible that Russia is less concerned with delivering a deal than with taking steps towards rehabilitating the Syrian Government in the eyes of Western powers. By forcing the hand of opposition actors, Russia may succeed in demonstrating their intransigence. This may help pitch Assad as the only realistic option left in a Syria under siege by the Islamic State. It will also put opposition players in the uncomfortable position of having to explain to a war-weary population why they turned down a possible avenue to peace. As the United States is seemingly retreating from its “Assad must go” rhetoric, it is possible that the coming year will see a reordering of priorities, with political transition taking the backseat to the fight against ISIS and its peers.

Beyond the level of separate peace initiatives, greater questions – of policy, strategy, and, indeed, history – are emerging in Syria. Many of these involve uncomfortable tradeoffs. Is it possible to simultaneously defeat Jihadists, bring about peace, and topple Assad? If not, which should have priority? If the ethnic separation and political disintegration continues, is a solution premised on the territorial integrity of Syria still meaningful? It is not impossible to imagine that the conflagration in the Levant will spell the end of the territorial order established after World War I. This prospect presents mediators with a daunting challenge. Not only are they asked to mediate a conflict; they are asked to mediate while the entire playing board is shifting.



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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Svensson, Isak (2012) *Ending holy wars: religion and conflict resolution in civil wars*. University of Queensland Press.

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