

Russia and the United States: A Test of Wills at Geneva

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Brief Analysis

The fifth anniversary of the Syrian uprising against Bashar al-Assad's government will be commemorated in a few weeks with yet another round of diplomatic attempts at forging a political solution. The Syrian crisis has killed hundreds of thousands, injured and displaced millions, and destroyed much of the country's infrastructure. Facing horrors not witnessed since the Second World War, the international community seems powerless, except for the hope that carefully crafted meetings in world venues, coupled with incremental steps of confidence building and attendance to humanitarian issues at the micro level, may set the stage for a political process to extract Syria from the abyss. This hope adds up to little more than wishful thinking for many, while constituting a thinly disguised cover story in the pursuit of goals of a far less reconciliatory character for others.

A new round of indirect talks held in Geneva this week between regime and opposition representatives highlighted that only the United States, if it chooses to restore the strategic balance by denying Russia its subversive maneuvers, will be able to break the cycle of futility. Russia, an open and active supporter of the Damascus regime, has sought to dictate the composition of the opposition delegation. The "successful" convening of the Geneva III talks required Washington's acquiescence to much of Moscow's vision for the future of the conflict and acceptance of Russia's prodding of opposition factions toward participation (e.g., [see PolicyWatch 2549, "Fixing Geneva III" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fixing-geneva-iii\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fixing-geneva-iii)). The occurrence of the meeting may be its only success, while focus on this event may worsen Syria's real prospects for ending its crisis in the foreseeable future. Incidentally, the meeting also contributes to the further deterioration of the U.S. image in the region.

In justifying its escalated direct military support for the Damascus regime, Russia has clearly misrepresented its intentions. While claiming to target the "Islamic State" in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Russian power openly dedicated itself to removing any and all opposition to the regime. It is true that occasional Russian strikes have hit ISIS assets, but Russian military support over the past months has ultimately achieved advances for the Assad regime, considerable weakening of non-ISIS opposition, and mere tangential losses for ISIS. The regime's gains are even modest in comparison to Russia's investment, since the battered non-ISIS opposition has been able to reverse some regime victories despite continued Russian bombardment.

Moscow's action has revealed the inconsistencies inherent to the non-ISIS opposition and has succeeded in unraveling and fragmenting many ad hoc alliances. This has allowed regime forces, aided by foreign militias

managed by Iran, to score topical victories. But Russian action is incapable of changing the fact that the Syrian conflict has long since metastasized into a Sunni uprising. Now, a total regime victory will require the subjugation of Syria's majority population -- an unattainable goal from any objective viewpoint. Therefore, the confident while flawed application of Russian force seems set to push the Syrian uprising toward further disaster.

The early protests against the Assad regime in 2011 were of an openly national character, with a dominant discourse of inclusivity keeping an undercurrent of sectarian rhetoric in check. With the regime's deliberate efforts to prioritize the elimination of civil, national, and inclusive expressions of dissent, coupled with its condoning and even enabling the emergence of sectarian formations -- and against a backdrop of international apathy -- the undercurrent of sectarianism was nurtured and coalesced into a dominant narrative of Sunni victimization. From the regime's perspective, this transformation was beneficial, since it excluded non-Sunni Syrians from participation in the uprising and recast them as de facto allies of the government.

The vulnerability of the Syrian uprising to the regime's maneuvers reflects both political and cultural fault lines in Syrian society. Even after its reframing as a Sunni uprising, the discourse of the Syrian revolution still referenced human rights and universal values. Nevertheless, as sectarianism became the widespread driver of the opposition, the new undercurrent of the opposition became radicalism, a rejection of international norms and legitimacy in favor of totalitarian religious interpretation. ISIS presents the clearest manifestation of this undercurrent.

The Russian offensive against the non-ISIS opposition clearly aims to develop a new binary in the Syrian crisis based on this new trend: "legitimacy versus radicalism." Many governments, perplexed and fatigued by the Syrian conundrum, have already expressed sympathy for this reframing of the conflict. Moreover, the internal application of the new binary in Syria is of considerable interest to Russia.

By targeting, depleting, and eventually eliminating non-radical Sunni factions, the Syrian regime and its Russian backer seem eager to reproduce their ability to develop the sectarian trend from the original nationalism that drove the opposition. By tipping the balance in favor of radicals among the ranks of the opposition, regime forces may hope to prompt non-radical Sunnis to drop out of the conflict, or even join forces with the regime.

The Russian haste to develop a fictional representation of a compliant opposition at Geneva III points at Moscow's eagerness to develop this "legitimacy versus radicalism" narrative. Yet such a feat of political engineering may be beyond Russian capacity and is deeply incompatible with the character of the Syrian regime. When under duress, Damascus has had to consolidate its "minority" credentials by reinforcing the Shiite affiliation of the Alawi community, from which it draws many of its military recruits. With Shiite formations from across the globe actively assisting the regime in its battles, the sectarian character of the conflict has become irreversible.

The immediate outcome of Russia and the regime's approach is the strengthening of radicalism and its manifestations, whether ISIS or in new iterations. By bolstering radicalism in an attempt to develop a military resolution to the Syrian conflict favorable for the Damascus regime, these actions instead ensure that the five-year conflict, with all its misery, suffering, and potential spillovers, will continue into the foreseeable future.

Geneva III does feature suggestions for a reasonable, carefully delineated course toward political compromise and national reconciliation. But the problem has not been the absence of proposed creative solutions for the Syrian crisis; instead it is the fact that the warring parties are locked in an existential war for mutual negation. No compromise is possible for the regime that has constantly insisted that the opposition consists of mercenaries for Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. No restoration of its previous rule by the force of fear seems possible. And it is inconceivable that the opposition would accept the regime in any iteration, which it blames for thousands of deaths and Syria's undoing. Even if Geneva III were a bona fide process, it faces insurmountable obstacles.

Instead, Geneva III has become Russia's tool to achieve its own goals. In the absence of direct talks between the

warring factions, the real interlocutors at Geneva III have been the international community, divided into three uneven camps. These include the backers of the regime -- Russia, Iran, and Iran's multiple clients; the supporters of the opposition, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, hesitant and striving to find a common strategy; and a global caucus favoring an end of the conflict, irrespective of political outcome, in order to contain terrorism and immigration as well as avoid further bloodshed and instability. With few alternatives available, Moscow's determination is gradually aligning an increasing portion of world opinion with its approach.

Left to its own momentum, Geneva III will deliver the illusion of a civil peace process. UN sponsors may be able to anticipate potential compromises on humanitarian issues. The U.S. team must in all likelihood remain content with the procedural success of proxy conversations as a precedent for more substantive exchanges in the future. Russia will be satisfied that the framework set in previous talks will now presume the inevitability of the regime's survival. Confusion and discord will continue to plague the political opposition camp, and military opposition faces attrition in the face of corrosive radicalism, which will be the true success story if the current strategy exemplified by Geneva III continues.

Only a bold and assertive policy shift from the United States can counter such an outcome. While President Obama has repeatedly underlined the symbiotic relationship between the oppressive regime in Damascus and ISIS terrorism, U.S. policy ought to reify this principled stand by consistently demanding the end of Assad rule in Syria. This must be done without any margin of ambiguity to be exploited by Russia and regime backers in their maneuvers to achieve regime victory.

The opposition to Assad will not vanish. If supported and organized, a rebel coalition could prepare Syria for a democratic future. The emergence of ISIS and its transformation into a global terror network is in no small part the result of Washington's reluctance to face the global challenges of the Damascus regime. Supporting the Syrian opposition is not an optional manifestation of the U.S. "imperial" role of as the world's police force. Rather, it is integral to U.S. national interests.

The United States was at the forefront of developing notions that promised to elevate the legitimacy of the international order -- the right and duty to protect. Russia has challenged these notions through its deliberate targeting of civilian facilities in Syria. This is a wrong that ought to be solemnly rectified. In no uncertain terms, Washington should condemn Moscow's deliberate targeting of the Syrian people and use all available international system means to curb it.

However late, a bold U.S. move must come. Had Washington acted years ago, it may have demanded much less investment and commitment. If efforts are further postponed, they may require greater exertion than what Washington would invest today. With regional allies -- notably Saudi Arabia and Turkey -- on board and an international strategy to address the incubator of terrorism that Syria has been allowed to become, the United States will be able to attack the problem at its roots. As President Obama rightly concluded in the first year of the Syrian uprising, Assad must go. What was true in 2011 remains true in 2016. If the United States develops a clear strategy to push forward this goal and dialogue to match, the odds are that Moscow will listen and stop its potentially lethal course of action.



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