How to Make Diplomacy on Syria Succeed

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Similar to other conflicts, diplomacy on Syria is as much, if not more, about what one does away from the table to develop leverage as it is about talks themselves.

The situation in Syria is looking grim, and prospects are fading fast for the so-called Geneva II conference. Given recent adverse developments -- the loss of Qusair and the surge of Iranian, Russian, and Hezbollah support for Bashar al-Assad's regime -- it is not surprising that some should call upon U.S. President Barack Obama to abandon not just his plans for the conference, but his Syria diplomacy altogether.

That advice is misguided. The question is not whether the United States should use diplomacy to resolve the Syrian crisis. It is how to make diplomacy succeed.

The popular notion that diplomacy and war are antithetical is deeply mistaken. Both diplomacy and military might are tools that states and, increasingly, nonstate actors use to achieve their objectives, and they are often wielded together. Just as diplomacy is an indispensable tool to avert, win, and end wars, so too is military might a vital tool in diplomacy.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to see a flurry of military activity follow the announcement of a new round of talks. As outrageous as Russian and Iranian support for a regime brutalizing civilians is, their actions follow a certain ruthless logic. Each side in a conflict will seek to enter negotiations having placed itself in the most favorable position possible and having put the other parties at the greatest possible disadvantage, with an eye toward securing the best possible settlement.

This is precisely what we are seeing in Syria today. The Syrian regime's allies have surged military support to Assad's forces to help them enter the talks with momentum and to ensure that the opposition enters talks dispirited and disorganized. At the same time, Moscow in particular has sought to limit U.S. options in advance of the talks -- first by using its Security Council seat to block any U.N. action, and second by discouraging a U.S. or NATO air

intervention by bolstering Syrian air defenses.

What is surprising, on the other hand, is how passive the United States and its allies have been by comparison.

Negotiations are not, contrary to their popular portrayal, about convincing the other parties, through charisma or fine prose, of the superiority of one's position. Negotiations succeed only when all the quarreling parties -- those doing the fighting and those supporting them -- identify a diplomatic resolution that better serves their interests than the best alternative available to each. Successful diplomacy depends on these two things, therefore: the deal on offer, and how the parties view their alternatives (or, in negotiating parlance, their "best alternative to a negotiated agreement," or BATNA).

Judged by these standards, the Assad regime and its supporters appear better positioned at the moment to succeed diplomatically than the United States and the Syrian opposition. With the rebels struggling to succeed militarily and the United States and its allies having all but ruled out various forms of intervention, the regime is unlikely to be in a mood for concessions. The opposition -- most of which would likely prefer military defeat to a deal that allowed Assad to remain in power -- has warned that it may stay away altogether if not provided greater support by the West.

To reverse this dynamic and turn the diplomatic tide in its favor, the Obama administration must do some work away from the table before it starts negotiating at the table. It must start by clearly deciding on its objectives. These should be twofold. On the one hand, the United States seeks to oust Assad and prevent the emergence of another Iranian-allied regime in Damascus. On the other, it seeks to prevent jihadi groups from seizing power in Syria, or even isolated pockets of the country, from which to press their fight against the United States and its allies.

These objectives provide some initial parameters for designing a diplomatic deal: It must specifically achieve Assad's ouster, but also manage to knit together a broad group of Syrians who will resist both Iranian and jihadi influence. Assad will necessarily be excluded from this diplomacy -- he is, after all, fighting to stay in power, not to negotiate himself out of power -- but Washington should nevertheless seek to peel away the support of Syrian constituencies that remain loyal to him. This suggests that the United States will need to offer credible, specific assurances to Syrian minority communities -- the Kurds, Christians, and Alawites in particular -- that they will be included and protected, by international peacekeepers if necessary, in a post-Assad Syria.

A deal of this nature will also appeal to the opposition, which thus far has resisted any notion of a political transition that includes Assad and his inner circle.

Negotiations are not, however, merely about putting an attractive deal on the table. Presented with the deal above, all sides may believe that their best alternatives -- their BATNA -- remains superior to what the United States is offering. To address this problem, the United States must change those alternatives.

To influence the Syrian opposition, the United States must make clear that its assistance is conditional upon engaging productively in diplomacy and entertaining reasonable compromise. Washington will need to send the same message to allies, such as Turkey, Qatar, and other regional actors, that are currently acting independently of Washington and one another. Qatar in particular appears to be supporting opposition elements to which the United States is opposed. But we cannot argue against something with nothing -- a more active and decisive U.S. policy will give these allies something to rally behind, and the United States will need to push them to unify their efforts and diplomatic positions.

As for the Assad regime and its allies, the United States must disabuse them of the notion that the alternative to diplomatic bargaining is military victory. To do so, the United States must credibly put on the table the option of military intervention -- both direct (through airstrikes, for example) and indirect, through arming elements of the Syrian opposition whose interests are aligned with those of the United States. This will send the message to those supporting Assad inside and outside Syria that military defeat is the alternative to a negotiated outcome.

Among Syria's supporters, Iran and Russia present special cases. Iran, which has dispatched forces to Syria, will most likely back down when faced with the prospect of confrontation with the United States. Russia, whose support for Assad is both material and diplomatic, presents a different problem. Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to desire an outcome that he can tout as a success at home, rather than one that comes across as a capitulation to Western demands. Collaborating with Moscow -- as the Obama administration is seeking to do -- on one hand, and linking this issue to U.S.-Russia cooperation in areas more strategically vital to Putin might facilitate a constructive Russian approach.

One frequently hears that steps such as these should be avoided because they will undermine U.S. diplomatic efforts. In fact, the opposite is true: Diplomacy is as much, if not more, about what one does away from the table to develop leverage as it is about talks themselves. If Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry desire a negotiated resolution to the Syrian crisis, they have a lot of work to do before they book their flights to Geneva.

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