No Settlement in Damascus

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Articles & Testimony

After almost two years of bloodletting in Syria, there is little chance that negotiations of the kind UN peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has been urging would end the conflict; more likely, they would prolong it.

In recent weeks, the argument that a decisive Syrian rebel victory would not necessarily be a good thing has gained ground in U.S. foreign policy circles. A negotiated settlement between Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and the rebels, the argument goes, would be preferable. Such an ending would have a better chance of stanching the violence and preventing outright sectarian war between the mostly Sunni rebels -- hungry for revenge against the Alawites -- and the rest of the country.

Yet after almost two years of bloodletting by the Syrian government, there is little chance that splitting the difference between the factions would end the conflict. Even worse, a negotiated outcome would perpetuate Assad's favorite strategy -- honed over decades -- of using the threat of sectarian war to make his adversaries in the international community wary of getting involved. Instead, the end of the Assad regime should be decisive and complete.

Of course, there are those who disagree. For one, Glenn Robinson, an associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, has argued that the Syrian rebels, if they win, will seek revenge and embrace neither democracy nor liberalism. Arguing along the same lines, Madhav Joshi, a senior researcher at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, and David Mason, a professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, have suggested that a decisive military victory in a civil war is dangerous. The victorious side, they say, is likely to try to exclude the other from government (and enforce that exclusion through its military dominance) rather than to try to co-opt the former rival's supporters by including them.

But history does not necessarily bear that out. Negotiated settlements have, in fact, proved weak in terms of

promoting mutual disarmament, military integration, and political power sharing. Less than a quarter of all civil wars since 1945 have ended in a negotiated settlement. Many of those power-sharing deals were broken before they could be implemented (such as Uganda in 1985 and Rwanda in 1993). Of those that made it to implementation, the governments generally collapsed into renewed conflict (Lebanon in 1958 and 1976, Chad in 1979, Angola in 1994, and Sierra Leone in 1999). Other recently negotiated settlements remain tenuous (Bosnia in 1995, Northern Ireland in 1998, Burundi in 2000, and Macedonia in 2001).

Negotiated settlements usually founder first on the issue of disarmament, as Alexander Downes, an associate professor at George Washington University, has found. Further, research by Barbara Walter, a professor at University of California, San Diego, suggests that negotiations ask combatants to do what they consider unthinkable. At a time when no legitimate government and no legal institutions exist to enforce a contract, warriors are asked to demobilize, disarm, and prepare for peace. But once they lay down their weapons, it becomes almost impossible to enforce the other side's cooperation or survive attack. Adversaries simply cannot credibly promise to abide by such dangerous terms.

More durable than negotiated solutions are rebel victories. Monica Duffy Toft, an associate professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, has argued that rebels typically have to gain significant support from fellow citizens in order to win. Once in government, rebels are also more likely to allow citizens a say in politics to further bolster their legitimacy.

Each conflict is, of course, unique. In Syria, given the timid international reaction, the competing interests of Russia and the United States, and decades-old regional contests, the conflict will most likely be decided on the battlefield, and the tide is turning in favor of the rebels.

But suppose that, in the next few weeks, regional and international powers decide to stop the violence with diplomacy. Four major issues would still stand in the way.

First is the issue of perception. Simply put, the rebels have fought long and hard, have sustained massive casualties, and sense that victory is near. They believe that they have momentum and time on their side and are confident that one final push in the capital could be Assad's undoing. They are not, therefore, interested in giving him a way out through a political deal.

Second, as in all such conflicts, the issue of trust is critical. Two years of war -- complete with unspeakable atrocities on both sides -- have provided each group with ample evidence of the other's evil intentions. No amount of ink in a negotiated settlement will change that, which makes it all the more unlikely that both parties will be willing to forsake their weapons when the international community asks them to do so.

Third is the issue of enforcement. The international community would most likely put forward the United Nations as a security guarantor. Reports have indicated that a UN peacekeeping force of up to 10,000 soldiers could be sent to Syria as part of the negotiated settlement that UN Special Representative to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi outlined last month. Yet given the UN's less than perfect record in stability operations, there aren't many Syrians who would cheer the blue helmets' arrival. Furthermore, now that Washington has designated Jabhat al-Nusra, one of the most prominent anti-Assad forces, as a terrorist organization, any political or power-sharing arrangement would exclude it. That would leave one more enemy to defeat and one more obstacle to overcome.

Fourth is the issue of regional patrons, especially Iran. To negotiate peace, outsiders who have been fueling the fighting with money, training, safe havens, and weaponry would have to start engaging in some creative and complex diplomacy. Because Syria affects the security of all Middle Eastern states, the solution would have to include all the region's major powers. That would mean bringing Iran to the table while also trying to isolate it. Tehran has already signaled to the Obama administration that it is willing to make a bargain on Syria to gain international

recognition of its influence there and leverage in future nuclear talks.

Any negotiated settlement would have to produce two key collective goods for Syrians: security and political power. Simply calling on the Sunnis and Alawites to give up their guns won't work. But providing a credible security alternative and helping develop an all-inclusive governing coalition could. The larger the post-Assad governing coalition, moreover, the more Alawites and Sunnis would be interested in sustaining the peace. But a difficult question would remain: If there is no agreement on giving the UN a peacekeeping role, what kind of credible international or regional force would be required to ensure security? History suggests that third parties rarely remain involved in post-civil war peacekeeping roles for long. In addition, they can be less than effective, and the experience of Kosovo bears that out.

These possible outcomes -- a negotiated settlement and a rebel military victory in Syria -- both have flaws. So far, regional powers have worked toward the latter, choosing sides in the conflict and trying to help their side win. If regional powers change course, opting seriously for negotiations to stop the bloodshed and build peace, the diplomatic challenge will be enormous. At this late date, such an attempt would be a long shot at best -- and would likely prolong the Syria conflict instead of finishing it off.

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