

Should Iran Have a Role in Syrian Peace Talks?

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As the crisis in Syria heats up, so too has talk of a possible Iranian role in resolving it. Visiting Tehran last week, U.N. envoy Kofi Annan asserted that "Iran could play a positive role" in Syria. Two weeks earlier, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov lobbied for Iran to be invited to Annan's "Syria Action Group" meeting in Geneva, citing the need to invite "everybody who has influence on all Syrian sides." The Iranians themselves have also joined the chorus, pushing to include Syria on the agenda of recent P5+1 talks and, on Sunday, offering to host talks between the Syrian regime and opposition.

The notion that Iran will help to usher in a political transition in Syria has been met with skepticism in the West. According to a recent Defense Department (DOD) report on Iranian military power and strategy, Tehran has provided the Assad regime with "military equipment and communications assistance" during the uprising, and has "probably provided military trainers to advise Syrian security forces." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it more succinctly, asserting that Iran was "helping to stage-manage the repression" in Syria. Iran's actions have not only provoked new U.S. sanctions, they run afoul of preexisting U.N. sanctions prohibiting arms sales by Tehran.

For Western policymakers to understand which view is correct -- that is, whether Iran is a potentially constructive player whose influence could sway Assad to change course, or a spoiler which could be counted upon to stymie efforts to foster an orderly political transition -- they must examine Iranian interests in Syria as well as how Iran's inclusion would affect the dynamics of international diplomacy. Such an examination yields a clear conclusion: Iran should be excluded.

The first question that must be addressed is in regard to Iranian interests in Syria -- that is, what does Tehran want to achieve in Syria? According to the DOD report, Iran as a matter of strategy "seeks to increase its stature by countering U.S. influence and expanding ties with regional actors," and uses tools including "active sponsorship of terrorist and insurgent groups...to increase its regional power." For these reasons, Syria under Assad has been an invaluable asset for Iran: a rare ally in the effort to challenge American interests in the region, a territorial base for coordinating Iranian support to groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and a forward operating hub to exert influence in Lebanon and keep Israel at bay.

Advocates of including Iran in diplomatic efforts on Syria observe that Iran was purportedly helpful in Afghanistan after 9/11, and that the U.S. engaged diplomatically with Iran regarding Iraq during the last decade, both by

including Iran in multilateral meetings and by assenting to trilateral U.S.-Iran-Iraq consultations. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, however, Iran was faced with conflicting interests. In both places, Tehran shared an adversary with Washington -- the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Saddam in Iraq -- and wanted to prevent the return of that adversary.

At the same time, and demonstrably more importantly, Iran wanted to see U.S. forces exit these countries, and in both places provided lethal material support to militants waging war on U.S. forces. As it does with Syria today, Iran professed a desire to see peace and stability in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is notable, however, that even after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, Iran continues to support militias and terrorist groups in Iraq, suggesting that Tehran is in fact perfectly content to subvert regional governments and destabilize its neighbors in pursuit of its own security.

In Syria, Iran faces no such conflicting interests. The outcome the West has in mind in Syria is to Iran a worst-case scenario: an orderly transition to a representative government. Any such transitional government -- while it may not feel terribly indebted to the West, given international inaction on the Syrian people's behalf -- is likely to be at best neutral towards Iran, and more likely hostile to it, leaving Tehran deprived of one of its few allies and unable to use Syria to advance its security strategy. Iran's leaders may also worry about the precedent that would be set by Assad's forced departure, given their own recent struggles with domestic opposition.

To safeguard its apparent interests, Iran must preserve Assad or a similarly cooperative proxy, or it must fuel Syria's descent into the chaos in which Iranian agents thrive. Given Iran's track record, it can be expected to try to do both -- to continue funneling aid to Assad's forces and other proxies to battle the opposition, even as they seek to involve themselves in diplomacy with the aim of salvaging Assad's crumbling rule.

Furthermore, inclusion in international diplomacy would serve another Iranian interest at a particularly opportune time. It would bolster Iran's regional prestige and send the message that it is not, as the U.S. and others assert, isolated internationally, but is in fact a key player in shaping the Middle East's emerging security and political landscape. This may sound far-fetched in Washington and the capitals of Europe, but conspiracy theories gain ready purchase in the Middle East. With the P5+1 appearing eager to avoid war and prepared to offer concessions to Tehran, the notion of a U.S.-Iran deal on Syria will be met with credulity.

Given this -- or any alternative -- reading of Iranian interests, a second question must be addressed: How would Iran's inclusion affect the dynamics of diplomacy on Syria? Iran's participation would likely ease Russia's isolation in multilateral forums on Syria, and thus reduce the pressure on Moscow to reconsider its own support for Assad. Given that Western strategy -- wisely or not -- hinges upon persuading Russia to change course and lift its veto of U.N. Security Council action on Syria, inviting Iran to the table would be diplomatically counterproductive.

Despite hopeful pronouncements to the contrary, mere invitations to diplomatic deliberations do not cause states to revise their interests. Rather, they provide them with a vehicle to advance those interests, for better or worse. Nor do such deliberations succeed best when "everyone with influence" is invited. Rather, they work best when enough states which together have enough influence -- and who can find an overlap in their interests which all participants find preferable to the status quo or most likely alternative -- are involved. As long as the Iranian regime seeks to ensure its own security by undermining that of its neighbors, it does not qualify.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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