

Annan's Latest Syria Plan Is a Bad Deal

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Brief Analysis

UN envoy Kofi Annan's latest plan to end the violence in Syria -- perhaps better labeled the Annan-Assad plan - is a bad one. It extends yet another lifeline to the regime, undercuts the armed opposition's growing effectiveness, and substitutes diplomatic bustle for progress toward ousting Bashar al-Assad. Like Annan's previous ineffective ceasefire, the new plan is almost certainly doomed to failure -- and the sooner the better.

Developed in consultation with Assad himself, Annan's latest proposal hinges on building security and stability from the ground up. That is, in areas of intense conflict, it calls for local arrangements to contain the fighting. This plays straight into the regime's hands, and it is no wonder Assad participated in its formulation. If implemented, local ceasefire arrangements would simply reduce pressure on Assad's increasingly stretched forces, giving them time to rest and refit, while preserving the regime's increasingly precarious military position in key provinces in the north (Idlib and Aleppo) and east (Deir al-Zour). They would also allow the government to redeploy forces to areas that are increasingly threatened by the opposition Free Syrian Army, such as the Damascus countryside. The regime will no doubt seek to exploit any such local agreements, or simply ignore them if it sees a military advantage in doing so.

The new proposal is a step back from the six-point agreement Annan brokered in March, which obliged the regime to withdraw its forces from in and around urban areas, end the use of heavy weapons, stop troop movements toward cities, and cease firing on a countrywide basis. The regime failed to implement that agreement in any meaningful way, and violence has increased dramatically since mid-May.

Despite these obvious warning signs, Annan's plan could gain traction internationally, which would suggest a fundamental misunderstanding of both the conflict and the regime. The war in Syria has become a war to decide the fate of the regime, not a prelude to power-sharing agreements or Assad-led political reform. It is, quite literally, a life-and-death struggle, yet Annan continues to proceed as if it were a political dispute that nimble diplomacy can resolve.

Similarly, the notion that Assad is a real partner in diplomacy flies in the face of what has happened throughout the seventeen-month rebellion. The regime does not seek political compromise with the opposition. Rather, it wants to break the opposition, killing as many people -- armed, unarmed, and innocent -- as necessary. That has been apparent from the beginning. Lately, however, the regime has been losing control of the military situation, and its position in the distant provinces is crumbling. Therefore, Assad probably regards the new proposal as a way to shore

up his defenses, at least temporarily. This makes Annan's plan a bad deal for the Syrian opposition and all those seeking the regime's end, but a good deal for Assad.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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