

# Syria: The Hope and Challenges of Mediation

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**ABSTRACT** *The civil war in Syria continues to devastate social and political structures, precipitating floods of refugees and surging populations of internally displaced people. Syria has degenerated into sectarian- and ethnic-based warring mini-states vying for power as their country faces utter social disorder. It mass-produces a growing cadre of battle hardened foreign and domestic jihadists affiliated with the various al-Qaeda brands. The war weariness of America and the unmanageable chaos in Syria combine to create shifts in regional politics. This article seeks to put into perspective the crucial role that regional mediation can play in nudging along practical solutions. Without regional commitment and coordination among key Middle Eastern powers, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, international diplomatic efforts to restore order and stability in Syria are not likely to succeed.*

## Introduction

**T**he persistence of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria has thus far been reinforced by a multitude of factors, including disorganized opposition factions, the diplomatic, military, and logistical support of Iran and Russia, as well as the cohesive nature of its state, which has survived three years of civil war.<sup>1</sup> Many argue that alternatives to Assad's rule are complicated and ominous. The breakup of the country, for example, would hold grave implications for the region as a whole. The status of the Free Syrian Army as the main opposition force has been eclipsed by the rise of more militant Islamist groups.<sup>2</sup> International attempts to push for peaceful regime change have proven disappointing. The model of NATO's humanitarian intervention in Libya illustrates a poor strategy for security and ineffective mechanisms for democratization. The new Libyan government has failed to bring the militias that arose during the revolt against the previous regime under control. This failure has led to fatal turf battles between rival tribes and commanders, creating ungoverned spaces in which radical Islamists flourish.<sup>3</sup> These radical groups have

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## International attempts to push for peaceful regime change have proven disappointing in Syria

effectively forged a bloc with the Libya's interim parliament (General National Congress—GNC), which approved a new government, led by Prime Minister Ahmed Mitig, in a controversial vote on May 25, 2014. This development is certain to further deepen the country's political and security crisis. International involvement in Syria does not promise to generate better results than it did in Libya.

The so-called “responsibility to protect” (R2P) has been abused in the case of Libya and discredited in Syria. The UN Security Council has been indifferent to political unrest and human rights abuses in Bahrain and Yemen. This questionable level of commitment has strengthened the suspicion of many in the region that R2P is nothing but the latest cover for Western neo-imperialism and liberal interventionist policies.<sup>4</sup> The lack of an active and more determined intervention — either for humanitarian or geostrategic reasons — can be explained in several ways. The United States spent a trillion dollars on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and has no appetite for further military intervention in the region. The ambitious, risky, and catastrophic foreign policy goals pursued by the George W. Bush administration, largely within the framework of military intervention, democracy promotion, and regime change, resulted in political backlash. President Obama decided to pull back from Iraq and other global hot spots and abstain from major military action. It was a decision that the American public has continued to strongly support.

The dominant view among President Obama's advisers today is that the administration should recalibrate US foreign policy to be more realistic and pragmatic. Practical necessities and pragmatic multilateralism have taken precedence over the ideological factors that motivated the foreign policy of the Bush administration. President Obama supported intervention in Libya and has stood in favor of internally generated regime change and democratization in Egypt and Syria, despite the massive costs to those nations, but he has reversed his predecessor's tendency to commit US troops to intervene in favor of these policies. The public also seems content to let Iraqis and Syrians fight it out among themselves.

Russia and the United States are making significant efforts at mediation, especially since an agreement was reached to dispose of Syrian chemical weapons. However, it appears that the efforts of global powers to mediate are limited by regional and local realities, which must be sorted out by players who doubt US and Russian sincerity, or question the ability of those two powers to agree on workable terms. Given these realities and the fact that the international community is unlikely to intervene in Syria as it did in Libya, attention has increasingly been drawn to regional initiatives and mediation.

This article seeks to put into perspective the critical role that regional mediation can play in nudging along global action. Without regional commitment and coordination among key Middle Eastern powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, international peace efforts to restore order and stability in Syria will be less likely to succeed. It is generally argued that the three most important principles and strategies of international mediation in settings involving atrocity and civil war are impartiality, inclusiveness and non-coerciveness. Given that it is difficult to closely adhere to these principles at all times and within all contexts, their application continues to be situation specific.<sup>5</sup>

In the sections that follow, we attempt to refocus attention on the mediation practice of inclusiveness. In the case of Syria, the central question remains the degree to which regional inclusiveness is crucial and necessary for a successful mediation process. We argue that all key regional players — namely Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey — should be engaged in the mediation. Without the participation of all three nations, partial settlement of the Syrian conflict might be conceivable but a sustainable, full settlement will be highly unlikely. Furthermore, we assert that the prospect of increased regional cooperation might be bolstered by the current tentative progress made in the talks between Iran and the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States plus Germany) over Tehran's nuclear program. Some influential Western analysts have compellingly argued that progress in this regard has the potential to remake the Middle East in a positive way.<sup>6</sup>

## Revamping Iran-Saudi Relations

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, but especially in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq and the resurgence of sectarian tensions in the region following the eruption of civil war in Syria, Saudi Arabia has become the leading Sunni Arab government in the face-off against the rise of Shi'ism in the Persian Gulf region and beyond. The Saudi role has been driven by both geopolitical and ideological factors. Concerning the key status of Wahhabism in the Saudi political system, one expert writes, "anti-Shi'ism is built into the structure of political and religious authority and has become pervasive in cultural and social institutions."<sup>7</sup> The Saudi education system, for instance, has explicitly advocated intolerance of other religious views that diverge from central Wahhabi tenets.<sup>8</sup> Whereas other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, such as Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have adopted a conciliatory approach toward their Shia populations, the religious divide has become increasingly pronounced in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup>

The 2011 turmoil of the Arab Spring initially caused the collapse of the so-called moderate camp (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt), resulting in the emer-

gence of new coalitions and strategic alliances. However, after a coup deposed the Morsi government in Egypt on July 3, 2013, Saudi Arabia managed to cobble this alliance back together with great amounts of financial persuasion. The Saudis appear ready to guide the alliance away from US foreign policy. Egypt will no doubt be preoccupied for a considerable period of time with getting its house in order and sorting out civil-military relations in this new era.

Nowhere is the competition between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia more fierce and direct than in Syria. While Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have become the main suppliers of arms and money to the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front, Iran has supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad in a conflict that has turned into a deadly civil war.

stonishingly understandable, enthusiastic about offering his services to youink of a better candidate for the WACansition from BaThe present trajectory of the civil war in Syria appears to lead toward the permanent partitioning of the country into at least three potential entities: a Sunni state or two, depending on the fate of the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Nusra, in the East, North and South; an Alawite state in the center and West; and a Kurdish state in the Northeast corner. In fact, since its emergence, the ISIS has drastically altered the political equation in the Fertile Crescent. Disarray in the Syrian National Coalition, coupled with the rise of the ISIS, has caused new concerns over the future of Syria in a post-Assad era.

Ironically, some observers in the West have suggested that President Assad may have to remain in power for some time to maintain stability during the transition from Baath-controlled power to multi-party rule.<sup>10</sup> Even if some coalition of rebels prevail and form a new government, there will be other rebel factions who are in conflict with the winners, while minorities and militarized groups who have stood by the state will be marginalized. Peace may prove to be elusive. If these groups are excluded from the new government, it is safe to predict a more chaotic version of the political instability of Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

The partition of Syria — if it ever comes to pass — would entail unintended consequences for Syrian religious minorities such as Christians, Druze and Alawites in the region. Moreover, many Syrian Sunni Muslims prefer the secular state and fear the jihadist rhetoric and extremist actions of the most effective rebel forces. The sectarian rubric with which the Syrian conflict is often viewed makes reconciliation and a future pluralistic society difficult to envision.<sup>12</sup> Yet the partition scenario would entail serious and further disruptive consequences for the region's stability. This looming danger renders cooperation, however grudging, between Iran and Saudi Arabia all the more imperative. Iran has warned that Western intervention in Syria will likely plunge the country and the region into a protracted civil war, with sectarian and ethnic tensions spill-



ing over into neighboring countries. In fact, regional intervention, by both Iran and Saudi Arabia, has generated these same effects.

What keeps Assad in power is the support of two large ethnic groups, Alawites and Christians, who comprise about a fifth of the population. Not all of those belonging to these sects actively support the regime by any means, but they prefer evolutionary change to revolutionary transformation. The former Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs who defected in 2012, Jihad Makdissi — a Christian — recently called this the silent majority in Syria, implying that it included, as others have noted, many in the Sunni population.<sup>13</sup>

Russia, Iran and Hezbollah — considered the last remaining allies of the Assad regime in the region — have contributed to the survival of Assad's government. Syria's well-stocked military and security forces have proven fiercely loyal to the regime and willing to shoot at their own people. The bulk of the 400,000-strong military has remained largely intact, despite many isolated defections.<sup>14</sup> Christians are wary of the terrible fate of their Iraqi counterparts after the US invasion of Iraq. As a result, some 600,000 Christians fled Iraq to the neighboring countries of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.<sup>15</sup> The Syrian Christians

A young Syrian girl look on as she stands near the Syrian-Turkish border line. Turkey has housed refugees in camps along the border.

AFP / Aris Messinis



are not against change, but they resist the kind of violent change that leaves them unprotected.

Apparently, Iran's governing elites have chosen to support the Assad regime at virtually any cost. Iran lost Hamas as an ally after they took opposite positions on Syria. Iran was also willing to increase tensions with its Arab Persian Gulf neighbors in pursuit of its geopolitical aims in Syria. Iranian support for Assad, and its apparent policy of forming a crescent of Shiite influence from Iran to the Mediterranean, has provoked Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar to assist the anti-Assad rebels with both arms and financing. Their goal appears to be to counter the Iranian effort. As Iran has reckoned the costs of its policy and is loath to fail, it is unlikely that the new president, Hassan Rouhani, will fundamentally alter this position.

Rouhani "has neither asked Assad to step down from power nor pressed for a halt of the Islamic Republic of Iran's military, intelligence, financial, and advisory support to Damascus."<sup>16</sup> A push by Iran for regime change in Syria or a demand for Assad to step down, or for that matter, cessation of political, military and intelligence aid to the Assad regime is implausible. Iran's conservative ruling clerics, represented by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, are highly unlikely to weaken their own regional and geostrategic position by doing so.<sup>17</sup> In spite of these geopolitical commitments, given that Rouhani has recently spoken about regional détente, there is an opportunity to enlist the new Iranian government to try to play a constructive role in Syria.

The unraveling of the Arab uprisings and the ensuing promise of peaceful democratic change has been followed by one of the most significant developments in the non-Arab Middle East region — the possible rapprochement between Iran and the United States. If the so-called "interim deal" between Iran and Western powers evolves into a steady normalization of relations, Iran's geopolitical and geo-economic status in the region would be bolstered, which holds dramatic implications for US allies such as Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. While Israel views Iran's emerging economic and political powers as a major challenge to its security, Saudi Arabia deems the rapprochement between Iran and the West to be a framework in which Iran's political stature and sectarian competition will increase to dangerous levels.

As a key regional competitor of Saudi Arabia, Iran figures prominently in Saudi security interests and concerns. Iran's regional geostrategic considerations clash with Saudi Arabia's, especially in the context of the political uncertainties of the post-Arab Spring uprisings. Saudi concerns over Iran's heightened role in regional affairs are partly justified and partly colored by strong suspicion. Iran's influence in neighboring Shia-majority countries, such as Iraq and Bahrain, has the potential to provoke the minority Arab Shi'ites who live mostly in

the oil-rich northeastern part of Saudi Arabia. This poses an existential threat to the Saudi regime.

On the positive side, improving relations with Saudi Arabia offers significant implications for unstable locations throughout the region, specifically Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria. The penetration of Al-Qaeda groups into the Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Falluja has created a common threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, linking the Iraqi and Syrian crises. Tehran has underscored the importance of improving relations with the Saudis, despite the fact that these two countries have been at odds over regional issues for decades, including: energy politics, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, US presence in the region, and external meddling in the fractious political environments of Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria. The leadership of both countries realizes that festering distrust and ethno-religious as well as ideological competition between them would be detrimental to the region's stability.

Syria is the latest and most perilous arena of competition and conflict between the two countries, with Iran, Hezbollah and Assad pitted against the Islamic Front, other factions and the Saudis. Despite the lingering sectarian and emotional impediments, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have much to gain from ratcheting down the aggressive religious dimension of their competition. Further sectarianization of the region will no doubt continue to undermine the long-term interests of both countries and the broader region. The debate over the post-Assad regime of the near future — while concerned with the question of a potential Islamist ideological influence on legislation, women's rights, minority rights and foreign policy alternatives — will almost certainly be secondary to more crucial issues, including existential threats to the country's territorial integrity, that is, whether Syria can survive as a unified country.<sup>18</sup> Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran must appreciate that partition would be a contagious disease in the neighborhood.

A systematic Saudi and Iranian dialogue to identify common regional interests may be an effective first step to initiating area-wide cooperation. The moderate discourse and pragmatism employed in Rouhani's foreign policy appear to offer both countries an opportunity to fortify their bilateral relations, while minimizing the "mutual threat" perception between them.<sup>19</sup> US Secretary of State John Kerry has under-



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scored the importance of a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia: “I’ve just spent a month in the region, and everybody I spoke to said that there is simply no way that things will get better, whether in Syria or in the region, if you don’t get Iran and Saudi Arabia to talk to each other.”<sup>20</sup>

While the first item on the regional cooperation agenda would be to find a mutually acceptable solution to the Syrian crisis, President Rouhani also hopes that the improvement of relations with one of the key regional US allies, such as Saudi Arabia, would have a positive impact on a future Iran-US rapprochement. In the meantime, some experts point out that the United States will become self-sufficient in energy by 2030, as new drilling technologies, alternative fuels and the curtailing of consumption will dramatically reduce the

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need to import oil.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as oil experts point out, the United States is likely to use oil from Canada and Venezuela if prices are fairly competitive.<sup>22</sup>

A key ramification of this oil independence policy could be that the curtailing of US military commitments in the Persian Gulf region. This would be a scary proposition

for both Saudi Arabia and Israel, as it is certain to undermine the Saudis’ strategic status, especially as President Obama and future US administrations turn their attention to Asia. Israel will face an emerging power broker, namely Iran, in the Persian Gulf region. Under such circumstances, the Saudis would do well to reconsider their hostile relations with their neighbor to the East, Iran.<sup>23</sup>

One could just as easily argue — from the realist point of view as well as from the deep constructivism of centuries of religious mutual rejectionism — that if the United States decreases its role and presence in the region, it will be natural for those powers who feel most threatened by Iran to bind together against it in more uncompromising ways. Saudi Arabia and Israel could find themselves in a tighter embrace, and Iran might paradoxically be cast upon more extreme self-help initiatives to keep an arc of power to the Mediterranean. Under such circumstances, each adversary may reason that it would be foolish to give any opportunity to the other side to outwit or outmaneuver them through duplicity at diplomacy.

At Davos, Switzerland, Kerry emphasized that America is in no way withdrawing from the Middle East. What he did not say is that the military withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan speak far louder than his intensified diplomatic efforts in the region. Despite the recent and proposed drawdowns of US forces in



the region, John Kerry is representing US commitment to the region accurately. The US economy is tied to the world economy and oil is a global commodity. The Pentagon has no interest in encouraging China to expand its military into the Persian Gulf region to secure the flow of oil to East Asia. Therefore, one may argue that US naval power will remain dominant in the Persian Gulf region in coming years. Rapprochement between the United States and Iran is needed not because the former is leaving, but because it is staying. In this case, we may find the Saudis coming back to the US policy orbit in some tense, distrusting posture, while seeking cooperative relations with a partially reconciled Iran.

### **Iran and Turkey in Pursuit of Common Interests**

The Arab Spring has intensified the political and ideological rivalry between Turkey and Iran. These countries, which have historically had cooperative yet conflicting relations, ideological rivalries and pragmatic attitudes, and firm yet strained diplomatic ties, have found themselves on opposing sides of the Syrian crisis. The fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, along with uprisings in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, has undermined the old political order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Turkey and Iran have both sought to exploit the fast-emerging “new order” to establish their primacy in the region. Aside from Turkey’s close energy and trade ties to Iran, the two have pursued sharply contrasting policies with regard to post-Saddam Iraq and its Kurdish minority, the future of the Assad regime in Syria and Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>24</sup> Ironically what sets them apart in terms of the new dynamics in the region could very well draw them closer in other areas. They are, for example, increasingly cognizant of both the regional political and ethno-religious fault lines and their interest and potential role in easing those tensions.<sup>25</sup>

One such fault line is the rise of ethno-religious tension in Iraq. Shia revivalism has intensified since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and returned to Bahrain’s political scene with a vengeance. As soon as statues of Saddam Hussein tumbled across Baghdad, the scope of change and the rise of Shia power became apparent. Sunnis, especially those with Ba’athist ties, associated growing Shia power with Iran and accused the Shi’ites of being manipulated by an Iranian campaign to subjugate and control Iraq. Many Sunnis subscribed to the notion that the Shias’ majority status within Iraq was nothing but a myth spread by the United States and that Iraq was being turned into a Shia state by force and fraud.<sup>26</sup>

The unfolding tragedy in Syria has clearly revealed the limits of Turkish influence over its neighbors and the restraints of its “zero problems” policy. Turkey, for instance, contributed little to altering the behavior of Bashar Assad.<sup>27</sup> By providing a buffer zone for Syrian opposition groups, Turkey has positioned

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari and his Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu shake hands with foreign senior diplomats and officials prior to a meeting on May 4, 2014 at northern Jordan's Zaatari refugee camp. AFP / Khalil Mazraawi



itself diametrically opposed to Iran. Nevertheless, Turkey continues to seek neighborly relations with Iran. Turkey values the common cultural roots it shares with Iran, and needs both natural gas and eastward trade routes. Turkey and Iran have cooperated several times in calls for a ceasefire in Syria before the Geneva II talks.

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, have called for an end to clashes in Syria, despite the fact that the two countries disagree on the future of the regime, with Iran backing the Assad regime and Turkey supporting opposition forces' demands for a complete change.<sup>28</sup> Turkey's leaders, however, disdain the presence of Saudi-supported radical groups on their country's shared border with Syria. These Islamic extremists are likely to diminish Turkey's role in Syria while also posing a new security threat.<sup>29</sup>

Iran, on the other hand, has sought prestige in the Arab world by embracing the Palestinian cause. To fulfill this mission, they have cooperated with Syria to arm and support both Hezbollah and Hamas. Iran is in a predicament because their support of their allies in Damascus may negatively impact their relations with the Arab world. Similarly, Turkey is in a predicament: the prospect of Turkish military intervention in Syria would be political suicide for the ruling party in Turkey, the AK Party; whereas the reality of non-intervention, or ineffective interventions by proxy, is an admission of powerlessness in Turkey's own backyard. If the conditions necessary for a ceasefire in Syria are not up-

held by the international community or regional actors, one expert observes, Turkey will most likely continue to be vulnerable to hard and soft security threats along its southern border with Syria.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of Turkey's and Iran's head-on conflict over the fate of Syria, Erdogan's recent trip to Iran (January 28-29, 2014) was evidence that both governments feel the need to strengthen their economic cooperation through bilateral trade and major energy deals. The easing of Western sanctions on Iran has created numerous business opportunities for Turkish companies, including in the precious metals' market. The two countries hope to increase their annual bilateral trade volume to \$30 billion by 2015, up from \$22 billion in 2013, through these new deals. Several preferential trade agreements are also in process.<sup>31</sup>

Turkey's role in Syria has diminished considerably. Despite Turkey's support for opposition forces, the main fighting factions are closely allied with Saudi Arabia, and Turkey's leverage over them is limited. Obama's attempt at rapprochement with Iran has the potential to further marginalize Turkey.<sup>32</sup> The AK Party's political struggle with the Gülen Movement and the plummeting value of the Turkish Lira limit the government's sway over events in Syria. Turkey has found it politically propitious to publicly approve a role for Iran in helping to mediate the resolution of the crisis there, knowing that the Syrian opposition forces reject such a role.

Nevertheless, Turkey and Iran's need for stronger relations could prompt a change from mutual conflict to cooperation in Syria. Erdogan is facing a potential economic meltdown domestically due to an exodus of foreign capital and a lack of fresh inflows of investment. Iran has been in a much deeper and growing crisis because of sanctions. The recent trade agreements bring together neighbors in need.<sup>33</sup> Marizieh Afkhami, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, expressed her government's hopes for this new burst of economic cooperation: "Our relations with Turkey have entered a new phase and we hope this trend continues. Besides serving the interests of the two countries, we hope our dialogue (with Turkey) serve regional interests as well."<sup>34</sup> Turkey could take this opportunity, utilizing its ties to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, to try to secure some détente between the two and find ways to wind down their proxy war.

## The P5+1 Pact with Iran

The ongoing negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran over its nuclear program will have major implications for the Syrian crisis. Confidence-building measures aimed at reassuring Iran — such as a US commitment to provide sanction relief or a promise not to use military force against Iran — would be

perceived as a positive political gesture that would induce the Iranian negotiating team to reciprocate in kind. By displaying a more cooperative posture, Rouhani's team has adopted an entirely different approach toward negotiating with the P5+1 group that is predicated on incremental steps and reciprocity. Iran's agreement to temporarily suspend its uranium enrichment program in return for partial lifting of the sanctions can surely be followed by additional reciprocal steps. Yezid Sayigh, a senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, argues that "the only thing that could alter [everyone's] calculations is a P5+1 deal with Iran. ... this could allow agreement among the main external actors on Syria."<sup>35</sup>

As sanctions have tightened and crippled Iran's economy, Tehran has found itself more and more isolated, with Syria remaining as its last major ally in the Arab world. As a result, Iranians have begun seeking political solutions. Therefore, the P5+1 governments should consider the value of negotiating a final agreement with Iran on its nuclear program, as complicated and difficult as that might be. The potential alternatives are war and/or a nuclear-armed Iran.<sup>36</sup> The positive consequences of such a diplomatic breakthrough for the region merit particular attention.

Similarly, as Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has come to better appreciate his country's own constraints and the enduring Western caution toward involvement in Syria, Turkey has begun de-escalating its rhetoric and accommodating ideas for diplomacy.<sup>37</sup> Turkish Ambassador to Iran, Ümit Yardim, has expressed this sentiment by underscoring the significance of progress in the future round of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. Yardim has also stressed the point that one way out of the Syrian crisis is for regional countries, such as Iran and Turkey, to continue an earnest diplomatic effort to find a political solution.<sup>38</sup>

Past efforts by Western governments to freeze Iran out of peace processes in the region have failed. By excluding Iran from the peace conference on Syria, Stephen Kinzer notes, the Western powers risk undercutting the effectiveness of the process. "The US policy of isolating Iran," Kinzer rightly posits, "helps further prolong Syria's agony and feeds instability in the Middle East."<sup>39</sup> Despite the increasing pressure to invite Iran to the international conference on Syria in order to improve the prospects for a ceasefire, the UN withdrew Iran's invitation to Geneva II talks under US and Saudi pressure.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, however, the Geneva II peace talks failed. Several factors contributed to its failure. To begin with, the whole negotiation process was actually perceived by both the Assad regime negotiators and the Syrian opposing as a zero-sum game. Another problem that made it immensely difficult for the concerned parties to reach an agreement was the fragmentation of the coalition that made up the Syrian opposition. Finally, the prospects for any desirable outcome were

also doomed from the start by two other factors: (a) the US decision to arm and train opposition groups even during the peace negotiations and (b) the rejection of Kurdish groups' participation in these talks.<sup>41</sup>

Iran's absence arguably undermined the possibility of laying crucial groundwork for a diplomatic deal in Geneva II negotiations. Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah approvingly noted during the Geneva II negotiations that "Iran can play a vital role in Syria and that Iran has a crucial role in solving this issue."<sup>42</sup> In response to the question of whether Iran is essential to long-term peace, one Western journalist notes that as a staunch supporter of the Syrian leader, Iran may have the leverage to convince the Assad regime to compromise. This means that Iran might be influential in shaping the outcome in Syria by either persuading Assad not to run in the elections later in 2014 or simply brokering a mutually acceptable replacement.<sup>43</sup> Echoing a similar sentiment, David Cortright opines that Russian and Iranian influence will be necessary "for any prospects for persuading the [Assad] regime to allow a more open political process."<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, Iranian journalist Mashallah Shamsolvaezin argues that "the US knows very well that if ever the day comes that Bashar al-Assad needs to go quietly, Iran is the only country capable of achieving that."<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon's decision to rescind Iran's invitation "a mistake, but not a disaster," arguing nevertheless that "Iran's presence was essential for success."<sup>46</sup> Similarly, both Laurent Fabius, the French Foreign Minister, and William Hague, the British Foreign Secretary, have in the past stated that Iran, as an ally of the Assad regime, should be included in Syria peace negotiations in Geneva.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, Washington has become increasingly aware of the fact that seeking a political settlement to the Syrian crisis may not be viable without Iran's presence at the table. Rouhani's support for the US-Russian deal mandating the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons in exchange for an end to US threats of air strikes could encourage the Obama administration to settle its longstanding political dispute with Tehran. Curious though it may seem, Rouhani has noted that his government is prepared to accept any elected Syrian ruler, suggesting that it could acquiesce to transitional arrangements agreed at the Geneva II conference.<sup>48</sup> More recently, at the annual gathering of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Rouhani reiterated his previous position, urging "free and fair elections" while adding that "no outside power should seek to determine Syria's future."<sup>49</sup>



## Turkey and Iran's need for stronger relations could prompt a change from mutual conflict to cooperation in Syria



## Conclusion

The costs of weathering a civil war in Syria, including destabilization from refugee movements, military support for the Syrian opposition, and the forging of a new generation of battle-hardened Islamist terrorists, have exceeded the boundaries of reasonable political and humanitarian calculations. Foreign interventions have continued to exacerbate sectarian divides and established a context for a future spillover of ethnic tensions in the MENA region. Intervention by supporting rebels has not fundamentally or favorably altered the correlation of forces on the ground against the Assad regime. More attention needs to be given to regional mediation efforts to seek a durable solution in Syria, one that restores stability and peace without intensifying sectarian divides and broadening ethnic tensions in the region.

While past mediation attempts by Qatari and Turkish officials have been aimed at undermining the Assad regime, new mediation efforts, involving Iran, should be directed toward seeking a transitional phase in which a political

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process can be put in place to ease Assad out of office with internal support. A window of opportunity may have arguably opened with the election of Rouhani. Many experts take the view that Iran's interest in Syria's survival as a state, its resolve to end the harsh sanctions imposed

on it by the West and, most importantly, Tehran's affinity with the Syrian regime puts it in a unique position to contribute to such mediation. Treating Iran as a partner in future negotiations, peacemaking, and mediation efforts is necessary for the process of creating a stable and peaceful Syria.<sup>50</sup>

The disease of sectarian and ethnic fractiousness in Syria is a threat to the stability of Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and even Saudi Arabia and Iran. Turkey has a long border with Syria and is the richest of its neighbors, meaning many Syrian refugees will prefer to find a way to Turkey in the long run if they can. Refugees flowing into Turkey could become bigger, hungrier and sicker. The northwest corner of Syria has been dominated by the Kurds who sympathize with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish nationalist party. Peace talks between the Turkish government and the PKK have not been successful yet. The Turkish state has every interest in the Syrian Kurds becoming enfranchised in a reformed and restored Syrian state.

Unlike Turkey, the Persian Gulf Arabs sense the security risk of Iran keenly for historic and demographic reasons. The Saudis and other Wahhabis attempt to limit Shi'ite power through the financing of ideological militants in Syria and

elsewhere, which has unintended results. First, battle-hardened religious militants become professional heroes and when they can, they will stir up rebellion in the Gulf monarchies. Second, a sense of martyrdom among the Persian Gulf Arab Shi'ites will only destabilize Gulf monarchies. The Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Turkey has maintained good relations with both Iran and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf region, including Saudi Arabia. Yet this triangle of Turkish, Arab and Iranian power has helped in pulling Syria apart.

It is time for this triad to begin to negotiate steps to promote the reintegration of the current divisions in Syria into one whole, pluralistic and reformed state. Otherwise, secessionism could become a norm in the region, since Iraq is also in danger of partition. In that case, no state in the neighborhood would be entirely immune to the centrifugal forces working to break it apart. The global peace talks in Geneva were an important formal beginning, but now regional talks about the neighborhood need to begin, with new paradigms for seeking common interests in a pluralistic Middle East. ■

## Endnotes

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