A Comprehensive Strategy for Syria: Next Steps for the West

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SUMMARY

The ongoing Syrian conflict between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and disparate opposition groups is far from resolution. U.S. and European policymakers should look beyond the objectives of the Geneva II conference on Syria, which was held in early 2014, and implement a comprehensive strategy to push the conflict toward a settlement.

Recommendations

- **Encourage the expansion of the Syrian opposition’s base of representation.** Western stakeholders must help build trust among Syria’s opposition to create a united front that can guide a post-Assad state.

- **Strengthen the Syrian opposition’s governance capacity.** Reinforcing Syria’s network of local councils is necessary to the establishment of a transitional government.

- **Begin dialogue with elements of the national army.** Syrian Arab Army figures have the potential to tip the balance against Assad and can help reduce the likelihood that a power vacuum will form after Assad’s departure.

- **Engage Russia in dialogue about a transition from Assad’s rule.** The West should guarantee Moscow’s strategic interests in Syria after Assad and present Moscow with a viable alternative to the current Syrian president.

- **Provide weapons to opposition groups that enable them to shift the balance of power in their favor.** Weapons will protect them against the regime’s onslaught, allow them to hold rebel-controlled areas, and help them fight jihadists.

- **Cooperate with Gulf countries to bring an end to external support for jihadist groups operating in Syria.** Qatar and Saudi Arabia in particular should be encouraged to stop relying on jihadist groups to topple Assad.

- **End outreach to Assad’s regime in the name of antiterrorism cooperation.** Such outreach is only bolstering Assad’s claims to legitimacy while sustaining jihadists.

- **Use the ongoing nuclear talks with Iran as a platform for a further Syria deal.** Tehran could be urged to compromise on Syria to secure a nuclear agreement.
LESSONS OF GENEVA II

The Syrian crisis is entering its fourth year without a clear resolution in sight. The government of President Bashar al-Assad is continuing its military onslaught under the pretext that it is fighting terrorists, while the opposition is trying to remove Assad from power without having a viable political or military strategy to achieve this goal.

In early 2014 at the Geneva II Conference on Syria, two rounds of negotiations between the Syrian government and members of the opposition were held. The Friends of Syria Group made up of various international actors, including the United States, presented the conference as the sole platform through which the crisis can be brought to an end. But the negotiations wrapped up without achieving their objective: creating a transitional government in Syria.

Four key lessons emerged from Geneva II.

First, the Syrian regime’s performance at the conference made it clear that no resolution can be reached while Assad is in power because the regime is not willing to compromise politically. Throughout the conference, the government maintained its narrative of fighting terrorism. But that did not stand up to scrutiny by the media or by the Syrian National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a coalition of opposition groups in exile that negotiated with the regime face-to-face in Geneva.

Second, the performance of the National Coalition during the conference increased the coalition’s legitimacy externally and domestically. On the eve of the Geneva II conference, the National Coalition had been highly criticized for not representing the full range of Syrian opposition groups and for its weak links with the rebels inside Syria. However, the coalition’s actions during the first round of Geneva II talks were commendable. It now has the potential to be a core political group that could become more representative further down the line.

Although the National Coalition did not reach an agreement with the Assad regime on any of the issues debated during the conference, it won the public relations game. Publicly, the National Coalition’s leader Ahmad al-Jarba presented the opposition’s demands reasonably, adhering to the goal of establishing a transitional government in Syria outlined at the Geneva I conference that was held in the summer of 2012. Behind the scenes, he indicated to other opposition figures and groups his willingness to listen to their ideas and involve them in the process of transition.

This success has resulted in a positive, though limited, ripple effect among other members of the Syrian opposition who had, until Geneva II, either distanced themselves from the National Coalition or felt excluded by it. Despite the failure of the talks, the coalition’s performance has reinstated a cautious degree of confidence among Syrians in its political abilities. But this confidence is not absolute. Although those groups that have been excluded (or excluded themselves) from the National Coalition, such as the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change and members of the Free Syrian Army, are now more willing to engage, there remains a considerable degree of mistrust among rival factions of the Syrian opposition.

Third, Russia had long opposed any initiative by the Friends of Syria to resolve the conflict, including by blocking United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions against the
Assad regime. Despite its hardline position during the conference, Russia’s agreement to hold Geneva II means that Moscow implicitly recognizes that a path toward political transition in Syria exists.

Fourth, the conference allowed different stakeholders to conduct back-channel talks, the outcomes of which are likely to be more relevant than the conference’s formal results, which were limited to a short-lived truce in the city of Homs and the delivery of some humanitarian aid.

LINGERING PROBLEMS
Part of the motivation for holding Geneva II was the concern of Western stakeholders that chaos might ensue if Assad were to be removed without the presence of a transitional government. However, Geneva II has failed to address a number of issues that any transitional government would need to succeed.

A major remaining problem is that Syria lacks a viable opposition that can form the core of the transitional government. The opposition has been fragmented from the beginning of the Syrian crisis, and it lacks a political and military strategy.

While Syrians bear a degree of responsibility for this fragmentation, divisions among the opposition are also due to the actions of its international backers. Foreign support for the opposition has been uneven, as the international community only chose to engage with some opposition groups but not others, focusing on those in the diaspora while largely ignoring actors on the ground in Syria. In particular, U.S. and European aid to the opposition within Syria has been minimal. The nonlethal and low-level military assistance they are providing is not enough to shift the balance of power in the country.

The opposition on the ground needs stronger support on all levels, military and otherwise, in order to increase pressure on the Assad regime and to be able to maintain order after Assad’s departure.

No approach was developed at the conference for unifying the Syrian army post-Assad, and no realistic strategy for dealing with jihadist extremists taking part in the civil war, both Syrian and foreign, was created.

After Assad, no political transition in Syria can be viable if the army remains divided. Ever since the coup that brought former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970, Syria’s Baathist political system has been built on military pillars that will not be undone with the mere removal of Bashar al-Assad from power. Currently, the Free Syrian Army is clashing directly with the regime’s official Syrian Arab Army. Meanwhile, the Syrian Arab Army is becoming increasingly sectarian, granting further authority to top-ranking Alawite officers at the expense of Sunni officers because of growing mistrust triggered by the rise of Sunni jihadists who are directly confronting the Syrian army. The regime is no longer confident that Sunni officers can be relied on to confront other Sunnis.

Even if Geneva II eventually results in an agreement on a political transition, such a transition will not be viable if these issues are not taken into account. Concerned parties therefore need to look beyond the Geneva II process to push the conflict toward a resolution.

BROADENING THE FRAMEWORK
The process of resolution begins with closely examining the roles of the wide range of stakeholders in Syria. The conflict has escalated over the years to include multiple political and military actors, and with this escalation,
the window has closed for resolving the conflict through one channel alone—whether diplomatic or military.

Meaningful resolution of the conflict requires a comprehensive strategy that links together external and domestic factors and addresses the main hurdles still in the way. While acknowledging that the Assad regime is the primary culprit in and source of the conflict, all obstacles to achieving a resolution revolve around the roles that other stakeholders have been playing, primarily Russia, Iran, the Gulf states, and the United States.

RUSSIA

Russia has been aiding Assad both externally and internally. In addition to blocking UN Security Council resolutions against the regime, Moscow has been assisting Assad’s government in its fight against the opposition on the ground. Russia’s military and political assistance has given Assad leverage and the confidence that he can win the conflict. Moscow’s brokering of a deal in which the Syrian regime agreed to the destruction of its chemical weapons has also given Assad a sense of legitimacy in relation to the international community.

Moscow has taken these steps for two main reasons. It is driven in part by concerns about its strategic assets, such as its warships in the port of Tartus in northern Syria. It is also attempting to assert its international position vis-à-vis the United States. The Syrian card has proven useful for Russia in this respect—by taking a hardline position toward the Syrian crisis, Moscow has pushed Washington to appeal to Russia as a superpower on par with the United States.

But Russian support is not absolute. Russia is not invested in the figure of Assad himself, nor does it have full-fledged influence over Damascus. And although Moscow regards its stance as being about countering international intervention in the internal affairs of other countries facing domestic unrest (as was the case in Libya), for Russia, the Assad regime is another bargaining chip in negotiations with the United States and the international community about Moscow’s own standing.

IRAN

Iran has enabled Assad to take an uncompromising stance in the conflict. It has ordered its Lebanese ally Hezbollah to actively aid the Syrian regime. Iran’s declared stance is that Hezbollah is its first line of defense against Israel and that Syria is the main thoroughfare for transporting Hezbollah’s weapons into Lebanon. It therefore frames its support for the Assad regime in terms of its concern about its security with regard to Israel.

The sanctions imposed on Iran because of its nuclear program were making it more difficult for Tehran to support Assad. But those sanctions were partially lifted during international negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, which has given Tehran some breathing space as it strives to continue supporting Assad monetarily.

Despite this significant role, Iran was excluded from international negotiations on Syria. This has inadvertently allowed Iran to continue to avoid being held accountable for its actions.

THE GULF COUNTRIES

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whether in their formal capacities as states or through their network of nonstate actors—such as certain nationals and groups with political, economic, and geostrategic ambitions—have been assisting various components of the opposition. Their aim in doing so has been not only to
to topple Assad but also to protect their own interests and secure a stake in the Syrian conflict and its outcomes.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been rivals for regional influence ever since the last emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, took power in 1995 and saw in the decline of Saudi Arabia’s and Egypt’s roles in the Middle East an opportunity for Qatar to occupy the position of pan-Arab political leader. This rivalry is being played out within the Syrian opposition, with Qatar backing the Free Syrian Army and the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia backing other members of the opposition that are now the dominant forces in the National Coalition. This rivalry has contributed to the divisions among the Syrian opposition and made it weaker in the face of the Assad regime.

Gulf countries have also been the main sponsors of a number of Islamist jihadist groups that have evolved from solely confronting Assad’s army to fighting against the Free Syrian Army and other opposition groups as well as among themselves. This has further weakened the Syrian opposition.

**THE UNITED STATES**

U.S. policy toward the Syrian conflict has been seen as ineffective not only by the Assad regime and its backers but also by U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia.

In the early days of the conflict, the Assad regime did not believe the United States actually wanted the Syrian president out of power, and as the conflict progressed, false redlines declared by the U.S. administration increased Assad’s confidence. The rise of Islamist jihadists in Syria further bolstered Assad’s position, with reports of clandestine communication between Western intelligence services and the Assad regime driven by the desire to fight the rise of jihadist extremists in Syria, who have expanded the scope of their activities to include neighboring countries like Iraq and Lebanon. The United States appeared to have a vested interest in the status quo as it jumped on the counterterrorism bandwagon, affirming the narrative that Syria would be taken over by jihadists if the regime fell.

U.S. policy toward the Syrian conflict has also shifted gears from threatening military involvement to expressing fears about overextending U.S. intervention. This has hurt Washington’s international leadership position, especially when compared to Russia, and opened up space for regional actors to claim higher profiles in the Middle East. All this has only served to prolong the conflict and keep Assad in power.

**THE COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY**

As the West, led by the United States, and the Syrian opposition consider their next steps, all stakeholders should take a holistic look at the crisis and the available windows of opportunity that can lead to a resolution. Western policymakers should think beyond the Geneva II process and take a number of policy actions.

**Encourage the expansion of the Syrian opposition’s base of representation.** Western stakeholders must help build trust among Syria’s various opposition groups, both within and outside the country, especially as the divide between northern and southern Syria grows due to political rivalries driven by external backers (Qatar and Turkey in the north, Saudi Arabia in the south). To do so, the West should work with the National Coalition to reach out to figures and groups that have so far remained outside of processes...
of international engagement, from defected generals to local committees. The National Coalition and its international supporters should listen to what these figures and groups have to offer and integrate their potential contributions into a transition strategy. Although opposition groups have been publicly critical of one another, a good basis of commonalities exists and can be used to continue to expand the participation of opposition groups and figures at subsequent Geneva talks and other international platforms.

**Strengthen the Syrian opposition’s governance capacity through initiatives empowering local councils.** Western nations must increase their support for the opposition within Syria. The United States and other international actors have been sending low-level support to the opposition in the country, but this has only served to sustain the opposition’s existence parallel to that of the regime. With the absence of strong international pressure on Assad, continued support from Russia and Iran, the chemical weapons deal, and Western intelligence cooperation with the Assad regime to combat jihadist groups, the Syrian president feels disinclined to compromise.

Areas under both regime and rebel control need to select local leaders who can represent them and establish communication channels between different regions within Syria, especially between the Islamist-dominated north and the Free Syrian Army-dominated south, forming the basis for decentralized local governance that is necessary to the establishment of a transitional government. The West should provide training for these leaders as well as listen to and meet their demands for specific logistical support.

Begin dialogue with elements of the Syrian Arab Army and other military figures able to unify the army post-Assad. The West has only engaged the Syrian military through support for the Free Syrian Army, ignoring the potential that the national Syrian Arab Army has to tip the balance of power. The National Coalition has mirrored the international community’s stance and has also refrained from addressing the army’s role in the conflict, despite the fact that Syria is governed on the basis of military control.

Any political settlement must include a strategy for reconciling those opposing military actors. But because of the sectarian composition of the Syrian Arab Army, Free Syrian Army leadership will not be able to bring Alawite officers from the national army under its auspices. Currently, certain high-ranking officers who have defected from the regime have the vision and the credibility to reach out to Alawite officers within the national army, yet they lack funding and have been largely excluded by the West.

Through engaging those officers, Western policymakers can coordinate with key figures within the Syrian Arab Army to begin a process of detaching the regime from Assad himself. The resulting steps should clearly acknowledge the complementary strands that political and military figures can play in the transition. This would go a long way toward reducing the likelihood that a power vacuum will emerge following the departure of Assad as well as toward mitigating potential sectarian divisions within the army and elsewhere.
Engage Russia in dialogue about a transition from Assad’s rule, offering political and strategic reassurance to Moscow. Having blocked attempts at Western military intervention through UN Security Council vetoes in an effort to get the international community to accept a political solution to the Syrian conflict, Russia has now proven itself to be a serious political player facing the United States. The West should build on this Russian confidence by guaranteeing Russia’s strategic interests in Syria after Assad (for example, its presence in the port of Tartus and its weapons deals with the Syrian army), while presenting Russia with a viable alternative to Assad.

This means beginning a conversation about what regime structures can remain and in what capacity post-Assad. It also means reaching out to political elements in the regime that would be more tolerant of change if transition meant retaining a degree of influence for themselves, as such elements are likely to be acceptable political alternatives for Russia.

Russia has cited terrorism as a reason for propping up the regime, warning that the removal of Assad would result in a power vacuum that would be occupied by jihadist groups hostile to Moscow. While having a strong transitional government and a unified army in place are long-term goals, planting the seeds for transition now would negate this Russian narrative. It would also present the Syrian people with a realistic alternative to the current dilemma of feeling the need to choose between Baathism and extremism.

There is a concern that if Assad feels he is about to be abandoned by Russia, he might escalate the war by using weapons of mass destruction. This can be preempted by working on detaching state army officers from the regime to limit Assad’s capabilities for escalation.

Provide weapons to opposition groups that enable them to shift the balance of power in their favor. Although Russia and Iran are likely to increase their own military support to Assad if the West moves to better equip the Syrian opposition militarily, weapons distribution to the opposition in key strategic areas can help shift the balance of power on the ground to put pressure on the regime. Providing weapons to opposition groups will serve to protect them against the regime onslaught, allow them to hold rebel-controlled areas, and help them in their fight against jihadists.

Cooperate with Gulf countries to bring an end to external support for jihadist groups operating in Syria. Gulf countries’ desire to remove Assad from power has been greatly motivated by concerns about their influence in the region, especially in the face of Iran, but also with regard to one another. Their reliance on jihadist groups to try to topple Assad, however, has begun to backfire. The longer the conflict continues, the more jihadists from around the world enter Syria, increasing prospects of domestic instability in their countries of origin following their return home. The West must work more systematically with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to reign in nationals who are supporting jihadists.

End outreach to Assad’s regime in the name of antiterrorism cooperation. Such outreach is only serving to bolster Assad’s claims to legitimacy while sustaining jihadists. The Assad regime’s only remaining claim to legitimacy is its narrative that the conflict is a fight against terrorism—as opposed to a
quelling of an uprising—and this narrative is not convincing.

Instead of framing jihadists as a common enemy of the West and the Assad regime, Western policymakers must acknowledge that those jihadists are a product of the regime itself. Some groups are indirect products, emerging from the desire to combat Assad and his allies, while others are more direct outgrowths, funded, encouraged, or given leeway by the regime to fight on its behalf.

Removing Assad from power would eliminate the raison d’être for those groups. A number of existing groups would quickly dissolve with the removal of Assad, while those that remain would be exposing themselves to legitimate pursuit by the Syrian state after Assad. Certain Islamist groups are also open to political engagement with the West.

Use the ongoing nuclear talks with Iran as a platform for a further Syria deal.

Although Iran was excluded from the Geneva II conference, it put forward a good performance at the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2014. There, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani affirmed his country’s keenness to increase its engagement with the international community.

Iran’s desire to improve its relationship with the West provides a key opening for bargaining over Syria. Although there is concern among Western policymakers about adding a new item to an already-delicate agenda, they should not separate the Syrian file from the Iranian nuclear file. Nuclear negotiations have been generally encouraging and have shown that Iran is not beyond agreeing to sacrifice certain plans to achieve greater gains. This presents an opportunity to use Syria as another factor that Iran can be urged to compromise on for the sake of the prized nuclear deal. But this can only succeed when Iran sees that the prospects for Assad’s regime to stay in power have lessened, making Syria a less attractive bargaining chip for Iran.

Saudi Arabia pushed for Iran’s exclusion from the Geneva II conference. The West should convince Riyadh that as long as Iran remains an outlier in the negotiations, it cannot be held accountable for its actions. Opening lines of engagement with Iran does not mean lessening the status of Saudi Arabia in the region, especially because Riyadh is an important Western ally. And an engaged Iran is a less confrontational Iran, which would have a calming impact on other countries in the Middle East where Saudi Arabia is a major stakeholder, like Lebanon and Yemen.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

There have been several missed opportunities to resolve the Syrian conflict, from vetoed UN Security Council resolutions to blurred political redlines and aborted military strikes. Such opportunities should not be missed again.

A single-track negotiations process is not viable. What is needed is a comprehensive strategy that would build on commonalities among stakeholders. This will require widening the lens through which Western stakeholders have been viewing the conflict as well as their networks and methods of engagement. These policy measures will be difficult to implement, but the alternative is either the indefinite survival of a bloody and oppressive Assad-led state or a terrorist-ridden failed state. 