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Judy Asks: Can Syria Be Salvaged?

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Salvaging Syria requires decisions that imply considerable moral and ideological concessions in return.

Salvaging Syria requires decisions that imply major concessions.

The Syrian regime has lost substantial territory, but a majority of the population that has not fled the country lives in government-controlled areas. Moderate opponents of the regime rule some other parts of Syria, but these opponents lack cohesion and internal consensus. The self-styled Islamic State (also known as Daesh), the Nusra Front, and many other Islamist or radical movements do not benefit from popular support; on the contrary, they are spoilers that must be countered sooner rather than later.

Based on that picture, efforts to save Syria need to consider three initial concessions or realities.

First, the United States and Russia have to put aside their inherited Cold War–era mutual rejections and agree on the precise terms of a coercive political transitional framework backed by the UN Security Council.

Second, including Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a transitional political process may sound morally unacceptable, but it is required to help end Syria’s human tragedy.

Third, Syrians will most likely overcome the consequences of their pro-regime or anti-regime stances in the future, but Syrian Kurds will continue to care about safeguarding their political autonomy. This may lead members of other communities to try to push for similar claims.

A new Syria will undoubtedly come out of the current tragedy. But it will most likely end up more closely resembling Lebanon or Iraq than Egypt or Tunisia.

Koert Debeuf Project coordinator of the “World Leaders on Transitions towards Democracy” publication at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

For the first time in more than four years, my answer is negative. The West could have installed a no-fly zone over (parts of) Syria to stop the country's President Bashar al-Assad from bombing his people, but it didn't. As a second-best choice, the West could have given anti-aircraft arms to a small group of selected rebels from the Free Syrian Army, but it didn't. The rebels warned the West that not helping them would make Assad and the jihadists stronger, but the West didn't listen.

There was still hope while Assad's army was collapsing, slowly but irreversibly. Members of the regime were happy to see the so-called Islamic State diverting attention away from them. Iran and Hezbollah did everything possible to slow the government's collapse. Nevertheless, the end of Assad was near.

Now #Russia has entered the game, all hope of a free #Syria has gone.

Now that Russia has openly entered the game, all hope of a free and united Syria has gone. Not once in the last twenty-five years has Russia tried to solve problems. On the contrary, Moscow has created problems in the form of frozen and not-so-frozen conflicts in what it calls its sphere of influence. Russia is doing in Syria what it did in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine: carving out its own miniature vassal state, with a Kremlin ally as the country's president. The rest is propaganda.

Russia will succeed in Syria because again, the West is looking away. So Syria cannot be salvaged because the West refused and still refuses to do what is necessary to protect the country and its people.

Sally Khalifa Isaac Associate professor of political science and academic coordinator of the Euro-Mediterranean Studies Program at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University

Salvaged from the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the Nusra Front, or salvaged from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad? Or from a vicious sectarian competition between the Sunni Arab states in the Gulf and Shia Iran? Or salvaged in terms of preserving Syria's territorial integrity, which no longer exists on the ground?

Arab states are divided over the future of #Assad.

Achieving any one of these goals contradicts with attaining the others. It is easy to talk about the necessity of a political solution in which all international and regional powers, including

Iran, are engaged constructively. However, it is clear that Assad won't go. Iran is on his side. Russia is politically and militarily committed to saving the remnants of his regime in Syria's Western coastal area. Arab states are divided over the future of Assad and have failed to demonstrate unified political or military action.

The United States and key European powers have no appetite for decisive engagement and are exhausted by the security and humanitarian consequences of the five-year crisis. Their timid reaction to the Russian intervention—acquiescence to Moscow's mission in principle but criticism of the limits of its goals—implies that the West accepts the cost of keeping Assad as a step toward enabling a political process. All parties have different interpretations of the basis and aims of such a process. If all sides' positions continue without real change, Syria cannot be salvaged.

Nikolay Kozhanov Nonresident scholar in the Foreign and Security Policy Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center

Unfortunately, the chances for Syrian salvation are fading. The current conflict, which includes elements of civil, sectarian, and proxy wars, has already ruined the country as we knew it before the Arab Spring. To a certain extent, the old Syria is gone forever.

The chances for #Syria's salvation are fading.

Further confrontation between Damascus and the opposition will only radicalize the conflict and increase Syria's chances of becoming a failed state. The victory of either side will not mean the end of the Syrian tragedy. A win for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (hardly possible) with Russian and Iranian support will turn the country into another Afghanistan, where the central authorities can control only the main cities. A victory for the opposition will inevitably mean the emergence of another Libya and the beginning of a new simmering conflict dominated by Islamist forces.

Under these circumstances, only a new social contract between the regime and the non radical opposition via a negotiation process can provide Syria with an alternative to the Afghan and Libyan models. To create a stable and sustainable country, this agreement should imply the building of new Syrian state institutions around existing administrative structures, on the one hand, and the creation of a more inclusive government, on the other.

Marc Pierini Visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe

The war in Syria will go down in history not only as a cruel and bloody repression of what was initially a series of peaceful protests but also as the ultimate example of cynicism in foreign policy.

Until recently, the negative cycle in Syria was fueled primarily by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the self-styled Islamic State, which the regime helped create by freeing from jail some of its major operatives. Later on, a U.S.-led coalition did not succeed in degrading the Islamist group. Now, Russia has started a major military intervention aimed not only at shoring up the regime but also at creating its own stronghold in the Middle East, while openly challenging Western objectives in Syria.

#Russia has delayed the prospect of a lasting transition in #Syria.

This new situation drastically complicates the prospects for a peaceful solution to the Syrian tragedy, because Russia makes no secret that it sees Assad as the leader of any transition. As a matter of fact, the Russian air force has so far largely focused its operations not on the Islamic State but on other rebel groups challenging the regime. More generally, in the past, during the so-called Geneva process aimed at ending the war, Russia did not support any serious effort to bring about a political transition.

By making the conflict an absolute proxy war with the West, Russia has substantially delayed the prospect of a lasting transition in Syria and taken the risk that the country will come out so badly shattered that no authority will be able to piece it back together.

Yezid Sayigh Senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center

Russia's military intervention in Syria has prompted some to hope that this development might enable a political deal to end the Syrian conflict. But this is wishful thinking for anyone who wants Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down either immediately or as a pre-agreed outcome of negotiations or of a transitional period.

A political deal to end the #Syria conflict is wishful thinking.

If the Russian intervention is intended to "create conditions for . . . political compromise," as President Vladimir Putin described to Russian TV on October 11, then this will mean compelling the United States and other members of the anti-Assad coalition to either accept Assad's role in a transition or settle for the continuation of Syria's mutually hurting military stalemate.

Proposals by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura to prepare for a negotiated solution through working groups crafting transitional arrangements and an international contact group to

undertake the necessary political bargaining could have offered a way out. But virtually the entire Syrian armed opposition came out against the working groups after the start of the Russian air strikes, while formation of the contact group is blocked by disagreement among the principal external powers over its purpose.

A last hope is to seek an armed truce between the regime and the opposition modeled on the September 22 agreement that allowed civilians to leave the besieged towns of Zabadani, Foua, and Kefraya while the regime suspended its aerial bombardment of Idlib province for six months. The ceasefire is now in jeopardy, but if the Russian air campaign stalls, Moscow may suddenly find such an option interesting—and the international Friends of Syria coalition should be ready to pursue such an opening.

Ulrich Speck Senior fellow at the Transatlantic Academy

At the moment, it is hard to see a united Syria with a single government. Restoring the rule of President Bashar al-Assad, which seems to be the intention of the Russian-Iranian coalition, appears to be possible only in Syria's coastal areas. And the so-called Islamic State will continue to be contained by the Kurds, the United States, and other rebels. In other words, neither of the major players in the war—the Assad regime and the Islamic State—will be able to reunify the country by force.

Neither #Assad nor the #IslamicState can to reunify #Syria by force.

At the same time, it is hard to see the fighting parties sitting at the same table and forming a federal government. The West is hoping for a transitional administration. But those who have been bombed and gassed for years by Assad's troops are not going to agree to sit with him around the table.

And Russia is unlikely to push Assad away from power, because one of the main reasons why Russian President Vladimir Putin has intervened is to make a point about the legitimacy of autocrats facing popular uprisings. Keeping Assad in power would also demonstrate U.S. weakness—again and again, Washington has said that Assad must go, without seriously following up on it.

What follows is that the only realistic future is partition. That could take the form of a soft, informal partition, as in Iraq, with autonomous regions. But partition would require fixed borders, whose delineation would certainly intensify the fighting. A formal partition is unlikely; redrawing the map in a region with states that have little history in their current forms would open a Pandora's box and bring even more turmoil to the region.

Shimon Stein Former ambassador and senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University

The short answer is no. Too much has happened since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. What began as an internal affair has turned into a regional and, subsequently, a global war. Syria has become the stage for proxies of all sorts and kinds.

#Syria has become the stage for proxies of all kinds.

Direct Russian involvement in the conflict has further exacerbated an already-complicated situation. Instead of concentrating on a campaign to “degrade, and ultimately destroy,” the self-proclaimed Islamic State, in the words of the U.S. president, Russia’s Vladimir Putin is focusing his efforts on securing the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—that is, on protecting Russian interests first and foremost.

Given that not only Russia but also Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and others are pursuing their own interests in the region—not to mention the United States and the EU, which so far do not seem to have defined their interests—it’s hard to see how Syria can be salvaged and return to the status quo ante. Too much porcelain has been broken.

The artificial entity called Syria (and the one labeled Iraq), which was the outcome of the 1916 Sykes-Picot partition of the Middle East, most probably belongs by now in the trash can of history. It’s too early to predict what will emerge out of the ashes. One idea could be the creation of a new Syrian federation or confederation.