

The Syrian Truce and Obama's Exit Strategy - not an exit from the Syrian crisis, but his own exit from office

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As almost everybody can now tell, the new cease-fire agreement on Syria is doomed to break down, as would any such agreement that does not settle the core political problem of the crisis. Of course, even a respite that doesn't last is better than nothing at all (although the truce has so far been very disappointing with regard to humanitarian relief).

But short of an agenda that includes a comprehensive agreement for Bashar al-Assad to step down and allow a transition toward a pluralist government, no cease-fire stands a chance in that war-torn country. Were the mainstream opposition to accept a diktat for a sellout, it would be rapidly outflanked by the fighters, for whom anything less than the Assad clan's departure from power would be tantamount to accepting that hundreds of thousands of Syrians were killed, and still more maimed, and huge swaths of the country turned to rubble, for nothing.

For a truce to lead to the kind of compromise that underpins a genuine peace, there must be strong incentives among all parties to the conflict. The lack of such incentives is precisely why the Oslo Accords, signed in Washington 23 years ago, failed to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict: Those accords were predicated on the postponement of decisions on all crucial issues, including the fate of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. The result was predictable: Israel actually consolidated its grip over the West Bank in the aftermath of the accords, provoking increased Palestinian resentment and an eventual collapse of the "peace process."

Without a balance of military forces on the ground in Syria, which would compel the Assad regime and its Iranian backers to seek real compromise, a genuine political settlement is not possible. We have nearly the opposite: A Syrian regime, emboldened by Iranian and Russian support, that boasts about reconquering the whole country. As testified by the key protagonists, the issue of creating such a balance of forces—especially by providing the Syrian opposition with anti-aircraft missiles capable of limiting the Syrian regime's use of air power, its main weapon of large-scale destruction—has been the principal bone of contention on Syria within the Obama administration since 2012. The fact that this issue is still divisive is attested by the Pentagon's reluctance to greenlight the agreement negotiated by Secretary of State John Kerry.

It was reported (leaked, that is) that US military planners had no confidence that the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian backers would comply with a cease-fire geared toward compromise. In addition, the Pentagon is unwilling to share military data on the Syrian opposition with its Russian counterpart for fear it might be used to further bombard the former. And they are right to be suspicious. Kerry has already deserved a place in history as an outstanding embodiment of

diplomatic naïveté, i.e. his belief in the ability to solve conflicts through negotiations that are not backed by action on the ground (what was aptly described in the Financial Times as his “boundless confidence in his ability to solve problems if he can only bring the concerned parties together in one room”), and his amazingly wishful thinking with regard to Moscow’s willingness to help the United States out of the Syrian predicament.

It is most unlikely, however, that Barack Obama—who can hardly be suspected of ingenuousness—shares his secretary of state’s idiosyncrasies. The US president has stubbornly refused to change his attitude on Syria over the past four years despite overwhelming evidence that it was allowing the conflict to degenerate into a catastrophe for the Syrian people and one more major disaster for US foreign policy, after Afghanistan and Iraq. In so doing, Obama has only managed to convince a major part of Arab public opinion that the United States, which invaded Iraq and bombed Libya for incomparably less than what has been unfolding in Syria over the past five years, cares only about oil-rich countries. If anyone in the region had any illusion about the democratic and humanitarian pretexts invoked by Washington in previous wars, they have lost them completely by now. As Anthony Cordesman, one of the most astute observers of the military-political situation in the Middle East, recently observed, the US president is now entirely focused on an “exit strategy”—not an exit from the Syrian crisis, though, but his own exit from office.

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P.S.

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