



## Can Diplomacy end the current Proxy Wars? 20 July 2015

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Is there any good news from Syria?

Consider this: the conflict is still mainly confined to the Syrian regime and the Opposition forces. For most Syrians, religion and ethnicity are not the main source of conflict. Even after almost five years of bloodshed and destruction, there are few signs of communal or sectarian violence of the type the Yugoslav war and others have produced so tragically. It remains, for the most part, a conflict about the way Syria should be governed, and between those who want a change in direction and those who are loyal to the regime. Not surprisingly then, hardly any inter-communal violence is reported between Shia and Sunni Muslims for purely religious reasons.

Regrettably, this is likely to change if the war is allowed to drag on.

At the moment, the sworn enemy for many Syrians is the Assad regime, whether displaced and scattered across Syria, or barely hanging on in their native towns and villages. The same hatred holds for the hundreds of thousands of refugees in the neighboring countries or in Europe. This regime has, to them and to many outside observers, crossed the line into war crimes on its way to crushing anyone who opposes it and harming countless civilians merely for living in the wrong place at the wrong time.

To achieve its objectives, the Assad regime makes loose arrangements of convenience, sometimes with Hezbollah, sometimes with IS (Islamic State).

Not to be outdone, the various armies of the Opposition mirror these behaviors. Coalitions of convenience are created (or abandoned) amongst the thirty odd militia groups opposing the regime: groups that range from secular organizations to bands of armed radical Islamic movements. The strategies of both sides along with their foreign supporters fuel inter-communal hatred and intolerance.

Syrians of very different faiths and ethnicity have lived side by side in the same territory for centuries, if not millennia. They cohabited long before Syria became a state. Yet, like in Afghanistan or Bosnia, foreign forces and governments with ulterior interests, have become increasingly involved in the Syrian conflict. Inevitably, over time, this intervention will lead to increased communal and sectarian violence, threatening the co-existence amongst faiths and ethnicities that make Syria unique.

As the international community, led by the efforts of the United Nations, struggles to find diplomatic solutions to the conflict, they must pursue an obvious strategic goal: to prevent the descent into further chaos, displacement and killing. The UN, and all those countries standing behind it and its effort, has no other choice than to deal directly with possibly the largest elephant in the room—the opposing views and actions of Saudi Arabia on one side, representing the majority Sunni faith, and Iran on the other, the beacon for the less numerous but equally fervent Shia followers.

In the wake of the recent triumph of diplomacy leading to the now famous 'Iran Deal', the landmark agreement that will ensure limits on Tehran's nuclear activities, presents a unique opportunity to push diplomacy even further.

Indeed, what is now crucial is that Iran and Saudi Arabia are coaxed—and supported—into coming together for a 'Grand Discourse on the Middle East.' Such a dialogue would require the most ambitious of diplomatic efforts and the utmost creativity of those leading it. Yet, diplomacy is indispensable. For as daunting as the challenge may appear, the daily news reporting and TV pictures of the Syrian conflict make the point that such a move is essential and that the time for a brave new initiative is now.

The stakes for inaction are high, not only in humanitarian terms. IS is already filling the power vacuum that war has brought about within Syria and Iraq. State building-like features have been reported, with availability of public services in IS controlled areas, as opposed to the dire situation experienced in Opposition held territories. The persistent presence of IS has, and will do nothing but increase the risks of polarizing communities along religious and ethnic lines.

On the table must be a debate on the proxy wars ravaging Syria and Iraq, as well as Yemen. Key topics should include security guarantees for borders, prohibitions of weapons of mass destruction, and strategies for dealing with the common enemy - IS. More positively, and in a spirit of opportunism, new and innovative ways of collaboration aiming at economic and trade deals beneficial to both must also be on the agenda.

If diplomacy is given the chance to work in ending proxy wars, the chance of a sustainable peace in Syria, and in even the wider Middle East, increases substantially. That is enough of an objective to try. And now is the time. The nuclear deal with Iran shows that even formidable obstacles can be overcome with diplomacy. Furthermore, the mix of opportunities and uncertainties, which that very agreement breaks open, is a good base for a strategic follow-up.

The four million Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and elsewhere, as well as the untold number of those displaced inside Syria demand nothing less.

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