

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Monday, July 18, 2011

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

www.philly.com

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## Commentary

# Room to negotiate in Syria, Libya

By Arlen Specter

Instead of just watching the carnage of the Arab Spring unfold, the United Nations should help negotiate peace agreements in the Middle Eastern nations that have been plagued by violence as demonstrators challenge authoritarian governments. A special U.N. negotiations unit could meet with the parties involved, find out their bottom lines on reform, suggest alternatives, and set timetables. In the past month, I have discussed this proposal with key U.N., U.S., and Syrian officials.

A negotiations unit could include representatives of U.N. war-crimes prosecutors to handle plea bargains in cases where the societal gains may outweigh the benefits of criminal prosecution. As a last resort, immunity for bad actors can further the greater good.

As Syria's situation worsens, there are some indications that President Bashar al-Assad may be serious about dialogue. His economy is in shambles. His brutality has turned the international community against him. Some in the military have defected, and his army is stretched thin fighting increasing numbers of insurgents who won't give in. These factors may have led him to permit a meeting of opposition leaders in Damascus as well as demonstrations in Hama.

Although Assad's opponents have rejected his call for a national dialogue, the parties might be brought together by a catalyst. A credible mediator like the United Nations could monitor promised reforms, report the facts, and apply international pressure, including sanctions, when appropriate.

I spoke with Assad and his father, former President Hafez al-Assad, during my time in the Senate, and I found those dialogues useful. Last year, I led a delegation of six senators to Syria to meet with Bashar al-Assad. Although we approached the meeting with skepticism, we thought it turned out to be worth the effort. Many other members of Congress have also visited Syria in recent years and reported that their meetings there were productive.

Both of the Assads engaged in meaningful negotiations on the possibility of an Israel-Syria peace treaty, and Turkey came close to brokering a deal in 2008, as did the United States in 1995 and 2000. In my talks with Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s and '90s, I urged, among other things, that he attend the Madrid talks on Middle East peace in 1991, and that he let Jews leave Syria. Whether that was helpful I don't know, but both came to pass.

In Libya, meanwhile, the growing prospect of a stalemate and continued killing of civilians are good reasons to seek a settlement there, even though Col. Moammar Gadhafi deserves to be in prison. Facing an outstanding arrest warrant for war crimes, he might be persuaded to step down.

The international community in effect entered into a plea bargain with Gadhafi in 2003, after his operatives had blown up Pan Am Flight 103, killed U.S. servicemen in a Berlin nightclub, and attempted to build nuclear weapons. Gadhafi made reparations, abandoned his pursuit of a nuclear bomb, and was readmitted into the family of nations in a deal handled by his son, Saif al-Islam Gadhafi.

Based on that and a meeting that then-Rep. Tom Lantos (D., Calif.) and I had with Moammar Gadhafi in 2006, when we visited him in his tent in the middle of the desert, I would expect negotiations with him to be difficult but possible. After listening to Gadhafi complain about President Ronald Reagan's killing his daughter in a retaliatory U.S. air attack after the nightclub incident, we had a contentious but worthwhile meeting. And the war-crimes indictment against Saif Gadhafi might motivate his son to take the lead in urging and negotiating another plea bargain.

The situations in Syria and Libya are so desperate that we must try creative approaches. The United Nations is the last best hope for dealing with the Assads and Gadhafis of the Arab world.

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