
Can Russia's Peace Plan for Syria Work?

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When it comes to Russia's geopolitics, the international community has a lot to grumble about. In the course of a few short years, Moscow annexed Crimea, fueled a civil war in eastern Ukraine, dismantled its relations with Turkey, and embarked on a unilateral military campaign in Syria. As Russia's military operations in Syria intensified, European Council President Donald Tusk warned that Moscow's actions would "only result in a new wave of refugees," U.S. President Barack Obama claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin was getting "involved in another quagmire," and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that Russian airstrikes are "undermining the effort to find a political solution to the conflict." And as Russia expert Dmitry Gorenburg has [noted](#), the Syria campaign reveals a dramatic rise in Moscow's military capabilities, a demonstration that will do little to soothe international worries.

Moscow is geopolitically heavy-handed, and this makes it difficult to acknowledge that Russia's twin strategy of bombing-while-peace-planning stands a decent chance to end nearly five years of civil war. For all its brutality, the Russian approach in Syria may accomplish two goals that are necessary for a negotiated peace. At the international level, it is forcing a very divided international community to come together grudgingly in search of a settlement, while on the ground in Syria, it is whittling down the number of fractious rebel groups and parties whose signatures will eventually affirm a peace accord.

Coverage of Russia's peace plan in the United States, Europe, and many parts of the Middle East often leads with frames of an aggressive and unpredictable Russia "calling the shots," foisting its own peace plan on an unwitting international community. Yet if the plan gives us the best chance to end a conflict that has killed over 400,000, dispersed four million refugees to other countries and given birth to the Islamic State, worrying about who authored it seems an immoral luxury.

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How Civil Wars End

Scholars of civil wars have long since uncovered a paradox: the international community favors negotiated settlements to civil wars even though such settlements are less durable than outright victory by one side. Since the end of the Cold War, the percentage of civil wars that have ended via negotiation has [jumped](#) from 10 to 40 percent. As political scientist Barbara Walter [reasoned](#) bluntly, such an approach goes against seventy years of learning on civil wars, particularly so in Syria where the landscape is littered with over a dozen major rebel groups.

Still, negotiated settlements can work, especially when they leave fewer opposition voices to shout across the bargaining table and when they give combatants something to lose should they choose to keep fighting. But this requires an outside force willing and able to hurt one or more warring parties enough to make negotiations an attractive option. NATO's bombing campaign in Serbia in 1999 is often cited as an example where force was used to engineer a negotiated peace. In the case of Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s, a peace accord required years of negotiations and shuttle diplomacy between incumbents and a nominally united opposition of political parties and warlords. At the same time, Russia and other states did not shy away from militarily assisting the government enough to deflate the opposition's confidence to keep boots in the battlefield.

The dogged diplomacy that the Obama administration favors as a path to a negotiated solution was never enough, as I [noted](#) in a previous PONARS policy memo, given the disunited and competitive approach of an international community of stakeholders whose mediation efforts were little more than a proxy vote for or against Assad. Russia's current approach to Syria combines both the dogged diplomacy that U.S. officials favor with dogged force for which there is little appetite in the West.

The Russian Plan Unfolds

In November 2015, a Russian delegation handed skeptical international and UN officials its own peace plan for the Syrian conflict. Russia's 8-point peace plan met lots of skepticism and was overshadowed by the military operations in and over Syria that the Kremlin commenced in the previous September. Nonetheless, UN Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura channeled his optimistic side: "Think about where we were a few months ago. We never imagined we would have the Russian Federation and the [U.S.] heading the same table" noting that the round of talks had generated enough momentum to keep discussions going.

Mistura was perhaps overemphasizing the extent to which such progress was unforeseen. Russian officials had been openly critical of the failure of diplomacy and the deadlock in the international community about how to end the Syria crisis; indeed,

throughout 2014, three major peace plans vied for attention and international sponsorship while the war raged. By the close of the year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov indicated that things would be different going forward: “There won’t be a Geneva II. If you think that a conference will be announced similar to the one that was held in...January this year with the participation of 50-odd states, thousands of journalists, bright lights, there won’t be such a conference.”

Lavrov’s words, for the most part, proved true. While Geneva II remains alive, Russia’s diplomatic and military actions in Syria in 2015 would reboot the international community’s approach. In rapid succession, Russia commenced operations in Syria, leaked the 8-point plan to maximize the attention of international diplomats, and used its plan as a script for intense discussions with U.S. and international officials before a lightly modified version was presented to the United Nations and approved by a Security Council [resolution](#). The plan recognizes seventeen countries as part of the peace effort and sets a timetable for a ceasefire and political process aimed at reaching an accord to end the war.

Taking Stock

To date, the Russian plan has achieved a number of outcomes on the ground in Syria and in high-level diplomatic circles. On the ground, Russia’s bombing campaign and military assistance has resuscitated the fortunes of a beleaguered regime. By December 2015, pro-government forces recaptured towns in western Syria; pushed rebel forces away from pro-Assad coastal strongholds; gained rural territory in the north; and retook military bases around Aleppo and Damascus. By the first part of February 2016, pro-government forces had besieged rebel-held parts of Aleppo and had come within 25 kilometers of the Turkish border. Observers noted that the majority of Russian military operations were aimed not at the Islamic State but at other rebel groups, including those in parts of the country who were working with Western support and surprised to be the target of Russian bombs.

But such observations missed the more critical dynamics Russia put into play. Moscow boosted the morale of Assad forces enough to prevent their collapse and aid their advances, but it has stopped far short of giving Assad pretensions that his forces can attain outright victory despite his advances in Aleppo. It has done the reverse to rebel forces, chipping away at their ranks and giving them unprecedented urgency to join diplomatic efforts before their losses mount further. Russia’s military campaign is a forcing function that backs up a key point of the peace plan now under UN imprimatur—less fighting, more talking between pro-government groups and whatever opposition groups are left. While opposition representatives walked out of talks at Geneva in early February 2016—citing Russian bombing among several reasons—de Mistura explained that such bumps are to be expected: “It is not the end and it is not the

failure of the talks. They came and they stayed. Both sides insisted on the fact that they are interested in having a political process started.”

At the international level, the plan lays out a clear timetable for a ceasefire and constitutional process to be led by the United Nations and shepherded by the seventeen-member International Syria Support Group. While the number of members may seem large, it is far smaller than the larger informal groupings of past years. The shrunken group is also more likely to reach a minimal consensus, in part because of the intensive shuttle diplomacy between key members. The lion’s share of media attention in the West has gone to meetings between Russian and U.S. officials, but Russian backroom talks with smaller powers seem just as decisive. With Jordan, a state with which Russia often sees eye-to-eye, Russian diplomats crafted a list that excludes a large number of Syrian rebel groups and brands them as terrorists. With Qatar, a state that has sponsored less-moderate Sunni rebel groups, Russia has engaged in respectful summitry to cushion the blow to Doha’s Syria policy and has likely signaled to Qatari officials that they will not stand in the way of Assad stepping down eventually. Likewise, Russian officials displayed a degree of flexibility in their thornier relations with Saudi Arabia and indicated they would neither object to the participation of certain groups that are part of the Saudi-backed High Negotiations Committee in peace talks nor would it remove them from its list of terror groups.

At the time of this memo’s publication, the main stumbling block is likely to be the distance between Moscow’s and Ankara’s views on the Democratic Union Party, or PYD, the main Kurdish rebel force in Syria. Moscow insists on including the PYD in talks while Ankara demands its exclusion as a terror group. Russian officials have given few signs that they will accommodate Turkish concerns, a position that goes too far in punishing Turkey for shooting down a Russian military jet in November 2015 and which ultimately risks growing international consensus on Syria.

The peace plan envisions ceasefires between the regime and the opposition in six months’ time and multiple rounds of talks toward the drafting of a new constitution based on “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance” within eighteen months. While the timelines are overly optimistic, the process is attainable and formulaic, keeping with internationally accepted conflict resolution modalities. And it is backed up with the implicit understanding that Russia reserves the option to keep bombing those who do not come to the table soon.

A More Civil Civil War

Weary after years of unpleasant geopolitical surprises, many international policymakers will continue to insist that Russia’s actions will trigger more global terrorism, or that the Kremlin has pretensions to become a shaper of the new Middle East while overshadowing the havoc it fueled in Ukraine and that Putin is hell-bent on saving

Assad. On the last point, Samuel Charap and Jeremy Shapiro have recently [argued](#) in Foreign Affairs that the United States should focus less on a settlement and more on creating “a rift between Russia and the Assad regime and to pull Russia closer to its own position.”

Instead, we would do better to take Russia’s Syria plan on its own terms, recognize that it is the best option on offer, and proactively troubleshoot obstacles that will inevitably fall in its path. In that regard, several cautions are necessary.

First, the violence in Syria will continue. Ceasefires do not happen seamlessly nor do they remain unbroken. The international community, teams of mediators, and units of peacekeepers will need to be at the ready to restore ceasefires that are bound to break down. Russian mediators and military units witnessed this firsthand during the Tajik civil war in the 1990s, where ceasefires collapsed numerous times and the violence continued for three years after talks between the government and a united opposition had commenced. Such violence was sometimes directed at CIS peacekeepers, Russian troops, and UN observers. In one particularly grizzly period, eight Russian troops were killed and their bodies mutilated and a unit of Kazakh peacekeepers was ambushed and twenty of its soldiers killed. Only countries that can politically cope with such losses should send in peacekeepers and mediators to ensure the longevity of ceasefires.

Second, major tensions will emerge during the course of negotiations and talks to form a transition government and constitutional process. But the source of tensions and breakdowns will not only be between government and opposition negotiators; an equally important factor may be the distance between Russia, the West, and countries in the Middle East on what Syria’s post-conflict government and constitution will look like. While Western policymakers will insist on principles of democracy and elections, Russian officials will focus on elite-level deals and political formulas in the government, an approach to state-building abroad that Russia has long [favored](#) according to Yulia Nikitina. Such an approach does not require a democratic regime but it does allow space for opposition forces to be part of the government from the national to the local levels. Before rejecting such an approach, we would do well to keep in mind what happened in Afghanistan and Iraq when international policymakers decided to foster procedural and electoral democracy over less formal principals of political inclusion.

Third, the international community and Syria’s national, provincial, and local elites will need a common vision of the country’s future. Sadly, this vision has to be utterly minimalist, framed largely by what most everyone wishes to avoid. If this means averting another civil war or the formal breakup of the country, then we have to acknowledge that the best we can hope for in Syria is a worse version of Lebanon, a country where a quarter-century after civil war sectarian elites, parties, and militias continue to carve power amongst themselves, fix quotas in public bodies, and provide

laughably minimal services. But poverty, paralysis, and sectarian segregation would be a huge improvement from the current death and destruction in Syria.

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