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The Pitfalls of Competing Mediation

WHAT TAJIKISTAN TEACHES US ABOUT SYRIA

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's spate of recent meetings with Russian officials are intended to chip away at the icy character of U.S.-Russian relations and bring Washington and Moscow closer together on Syria. The most recent meeting in Paris between Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in which Lavrov again indicated that Moscow would encourage the Syrian government to attend peace talks, was at the very least an improvement from last December when Lavrov declared that—when it comes to Bashar al-Assad—Russia is not a postman. Moscow's signals are of little interest to pro-intervention policymakers in Washington, and pundits and journalists note that, thanks to Moscow's military aid, government forces in Syria have formidable air defenses that are likely to knock American planes out of the sky. And so the international community continues to lay much of the blame on Russia for blocking mediation attempts and encouraging the Assad regime to fight on.

The treatment of Russia as a mediation spoiler is in stark contrast to its quietly celebrated role in ending the civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s. The accord was the result of a three-year effort by the United Nations Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT), neighboring states, and—perhaps most notably—an intensive collaborative Track II effort by Russia and the United States. Together, these players hosted eight rounds of peace talks, restored multiple failed ceasefires, mediated on behalf of various factions, drafted vital sections of the peace agreement, and formed a Contact Group to monitor and troubleshoot implementation.

While Tajikistan became a textbook case for how to mediate, it was also tossed to the side and forgotten. But recalling the Tajik episode is more than a nostalgic look back at a time when U.S.-Russian relations were more amicable. It is also a good look at how the mediation modalities of the international community have de-evolved. Whereas the compact and limber Tajik mediation initiative was designed to stop a civil war,

[*] *The views here are solely the author's and not those of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.*

mediation efforts in Syria have become a vote for or against a regime. But more worryingly, the greatest harm to mediation in Syria may have come from the disunited and competitive approach of the states in the anti-Assad camp.

The Forgotten Case of Tajikistan

Soon after becoming independent in 1991, Tajikistan collapsed into a devastating civil war. Government forces, warlords, and fragments of opposition—Islamist and otherwise—battled one another across its territory in a prolonged conflict that killed tens of thousands, displaced half a million, and stranded 80 percent of the population in grinding poverty. As the civil war intensified in 1994, a host of players laid the groundwork for mediation. The UN sent in special representatives, an OSCE center was set up in June, and a small CIS peacekeeping contingent was installed in September. Meanwhile, a UN observer mission (UNMOT) was authorized by the UN Security Council and tasked with the goal of monitoring the conflict and ceasefire agreements between local commanders.

Parallel to these efforts, the Inter-Tajik Dialogue, led by an American and Russian team of expert mediators, organized a series of meetings with the opposition and government representatives. The dialogue would ultimately hold 35 negotiations, many of these in Moscow, and its most essential outcome was cajoling Tajikistan's highly fragmented opposition to meet and establish a negotiating platform. By 1994, in a meeting in Tehran, anti-government elites had coalesced into the United Tajik Opposition, an umbrella group that included the large Islamic Renaissance Party.

Despite the evolution of the negotiations and the signing of a ceasefire in October 1994, the civil war continued. The violence was occasionally directed at CIS peacekeepers, Russian troops, and UN observers. In January 1995, a Russian platoon on the Tajik-Afghan border was ambushed by opposition fighters. Nine Russians were killed and their bodies mutilated. UNMOT observers were also targets of violence, and a UN cable reported that "UNMOT military observers were stopped by government soldiers, physically harassed, their lives threatened and equipment stolen."

The conflict came to an end formally in June 1997 when government and opposition factions signed a peace accord in Moscow. The implementation of the accord was overseen by a Contact Group in which Russia, Iran, UNMOT, and the OSCE played particularly active parts. Despite their divergent modalities and strategic interests, members of the Contact Group shared two overriding concerns: a desire to prevent a resumption of the civil war and limited budgets. Russia did its part by offering the continued services of a small peacekeeping mission and military units to guard Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan. The peacekeeping units protected key installations around the capital, while the border units prevented extremists from crossing over the border to derail the peace agreement.

The Tajik mediation was a low-cost and efficient way to intervene in a civil war. It also offers a number of lessons, two of which remain hugely relevant for the Syrian crisis. First, mediators did not compete with one another. Iran, Russia, the United Nations, and the United States worked together informally but regularly. They kept each

other's representatives informed, avoided duplicating efforts, and worked to end the conflict for the sake of regional stability, which they prized more than staking out ideological positions in their foreign policy.

Second, high-level mediation was paralleled by local efforts. The mediating parties did not take it for granted that agreements reached across Tajik elites in Moscow or elsewhere would necessarily trickle down to warring commanders. They insisted that opposition and government representatives rein in clients on the ground, and they backed this up with observer teams—operating with light security and few assurances to their security—to monitor progress towards ceasefires. Mediating powers stayed the course and kept their observers and peacekeepers on the ground even when attacked and threatened, demonstrating their resolve to the warring parties to see the ceasefire through. Today, Tajikistan is authoritarian, corrupt, and poor, but it is also stable enough to allay fears of a return to conflict.

Stumbling in Syria

Many policymakers and pundits would likely note that Tajikistan and Syria are not comparable and that there is much more at stake in Syria. After all, Syria is taking place during the wholesale regional upheaval of the Arab Spring, U.S.-Russia relations are too shattered to find a middle ground over Syria, and the role of extremist militias makes most any intervention very risky. Syria, in short, is too messy to intervene in a productive way. Yet the Tajikistan mediation followed major regional upheavals as well. It came on the heel of the collapse of the Soviet Union and took place as the Taliban raced into Kabul and rolled up neighboring Afghanistan. Moreover, U.S.-Russian mediation attempts took place despite fractious disagreement and deteriorating relations over opposing stands over the conflicts in former Yugoslavia. And the peaceful resolution of the Tajik civil war makes it easy to forget that in its first years, it was an extremely messy conflict with its own share of extremist militias. In that respect, Syria's political and battlefield dynamics in 2013 are not unlike Tajikistan's in the 1990s.

The failure to find an international solution in Syria lies more with the aspiring mediators than the warring factions. In grappling with the civil war in Syria, would-be mediators sabotaged one another via competing mediation modalities and missed the opportunity to deploy a sustained presence on the ground to negotiate and monitor ceasefires.

When mentioning competition or disagreement over Syria, most readers will naturally gravitate to the disagreements between the "Assad must go" side (United States, Turkey, and most Arab states) and the "Assad should stay" camp (attributed to Iran and perhaps incorrectly to Russia).* Instead, I argue that the more destructive competition has taken place within the "Assad should go" camp. This goes beyond the fractured inter-agency debates in the United States over whether and how to intervene.

*As Ekaterina Stepanova has argued, Russia does not have a stake in Assad staying as much as it has a stake in the form and substance of a transition to a post-Assad government. See "The Syria Crisis and the Making of Russia's Foreign Policy," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 199 (June 2012) and "The Syrian Civil War: Transition Without Intervention?" PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 228 (September 2012).

For the past two years, the United States, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, France, Great Britain, and others have engaged in acts of competitive diplomacy and rival summitry. For example, Turkey initially hosted the opposition and then supported the UN Annan Plan, while France undertook the Friends of Syria initiative to pressure Assad. In November 2012, large swaths of the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army joined the Syrian National Coalition in Cairo, but the group remains fragmented, with tenuous connections to warring parties on the ground, Syrian civil society, and political groups who have remained in the country.

The principle motive for the competition is that a number of countries are eager to assert themselves and build greater political capital in a transformed Middle East. Turkey wishes to attain a role as the chief regional power while also regaining its prized position as a mediator, a position it lost when relations with Israel deteriorated and its role in brokering Israel-Palestinian peace dissipated. This will be increasingly difficult after the large anti-government protests in Turkey, which hugely complicate Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's domestic and foreign policy. Egypt's embattled government desires to restore the mediating architecture the country owned before the revolution and sees aspiring powers like Qatar as annoyances. As one Egyptian journalist told this author, "Qatar is a fake power and we are not expecting anything consistent from it in the future." Qatar has roared forward using its oil money to bankroll oppositions and militias across the Middle East, from Libya to Syria. A Syrian member of the opposition remarked, "Qatar has been distributing weapons like candy, even the Saudis are alarmed."

As a result of this competition, the various pieces of the opposition inside and outside Syria have been able to cultivate links and ties to their preferred go-to states for aid and influence. An opportunity was thus lost earlier in the conflict to draw the opposition to a less fractious and more unified platform. Despite its name, the recently incarnated Syrian National Coalition is tenuously coalesced, speaks with multiple voices, and gives the Assad government little reason to engage in meaningful negotiations. Its fractious and unproductive May meeting in Istanbul made it clear that, if anything, the opposition is become more divided over time.

If the international community was lackluster in bringing the Syrian opposition together, its role on the ground in Syria has been abysmal. As the Tajik case shows, third-party missions are key during civil wars. They cajole warring parties to observe ceasefires and generate a pool of generally objective information about the situation on the ground that the international community can use to troubleshoot intervention. But in Syria, observer and monitoring missions were abortive, sending signals to combatants that the international community did not have the stomach for a messy local footprint. Consider the Arab League, which sent a small team of observers into Syria early on in the conflict. Unable to guarantee their security, the League kept the observers mostly indoors and then yanked them from the country.

Kofi Annan's subsequent UN mediation mission (launched in February 2012) did not fare much better. A mediator close to the Annan mission noted that the mission was under great pressure to show progress. Unable to broker and observe ceasefires, the

mission shifted to more discrete tasks, such as negotiating a temporary halt to a siege of one urban area so that students could take university exams. This pared-down approach left little chance of brokering or backing up ceasefires. The mission ended in August 2012, and UN envory Lakhdar Brahimi's recuperative effort has a tough road ahead.

It is as tempting as it is incorrect to bash Russia for the violent stalemate in Syria. The diplomacy of states in the pro-opposition camp has failed to do two things that are essential to good mediation in civil wars: helping the fractured opposition coalesce into a *de facto* and not just *de jure* umbrella and reinforcing this with a local presence to monitor ceasefires among warring commanders.

Unsurprisingly, international policymakers are loath to admit that the Syrian opposition remains disunited and unrooted from its Syrian origins. Behind closed doors they are much more forthcoming. A U.S. government official working closely on Syria recently confided, "the opposition has nothing going on and it lacks a connection to political and civil society groups in Syria."

The Road Ahead

A rising chorus of voices now sings of Syria as an emerging Somalia on the Mediterranean. Such loaded predictions about a permanently collapsed state are colorful but exaggerated. The Syrian conflict is becoming a stalemate, with pro- and anti-government forces entrenched mostly in geographically discrete and defensible parts of the country. With Qusayr falling into the hands of Assad forces, Damascus has secured a land bridge to the pro-regime strongholds along the coast deepening the stalemate reality. This stalemate may provide the international community a much-needed opportunity to reset its mediation strategy. But this requires making unlikely changes.

First, this means ending competition within the pro-opposition camp of mediating powers. Pro-opposition powers must set clear and coordinated terms for their engagement with the opposition. This does not mean deciding whether or not to supply weapons; rather, it refers to terms of reference and obligations to other pro-opposition states, such as informing them about any contacts and engagement with opposition groups inside and outside Syria. This would go a long way toward ensuring that the international community acts more productively to unite the opposition and cajole government incumbents to the negotiating table. This would also lay the foundation for a better and stronger Contact Group for Syria, similar to the one created to address the Tajik conflict. But with the preparations for peace talks later this summer, policymakers remains all too focused on the shenanigans of Russia and Iran rather than on how to bridge differences across the states rooting for the opposition.

Second, a fruitful step would involve creating a new observer team modeled after the UNMOT mission in Tajikistan. This team would have to be prepared for the difficulties of brokering and observing ceasefires even in the face of threats and violence to the observers. But in recent years, the favored practice has been to send in high-level special envoys who parachute in and out of conflicts when security situations get difficult.

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