

## **Time for National Reconciliation in Syria**

By Patrick Seale

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The swift collapse of Lakhdar Brahimi's Syrian ceasefire is a grave disappointment for all those – such as myself – who had hoped that the time had come to stop the killing and start the difficult process of national reconciliation. But all is not lost.

Although massive obstacles remain, there are reasons to believe that Syria – a state at the very heart of the Arab political system -- can still be saved from destruction and national disintegration. Brahimi, the UN and Arab League peace mediator, has certainly not given up. He remains resolved to bring the Asad regime and its opponents to the negotiating table before the whole country is reduced to rubble.

What are the obstacles to a peaceful settlement? First and foremost are the profound wounds which twenty months of savage conflict have inflicted on Syrian society. The deep mistrust, ferocious hate and thirst for revenge aroused on both sides by the pitiless fighting could take years to dispel. There is as yet no readiness for reconciliation on either side.

Another major obstacle to reconciliation is the ever greater role in the rebellion of extremist Islamist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and others. These groups have no interest whatsoever in a ceasefire, still less in a negotiation with the regime. Their objective is to destroy the secular Ba'athist state and replace it with a strict Islamic one.

Jabhat al-Nusra, described by the Swedish scholar Aron Lund as a spinoff from an Iraqi al-Qaida faction, has specialised in suicide bombings in Syria and other acts of terrorism. It is widely considered responsible for exploding a bomb in Damascus on the first day of Eid al-Adha, which effectively sabotaged Brahimi's ceasefire. The regime had agreed to the ceasefire but had reserved the right to fight back if attacked – which it promptly did. The sad truth is that just as hard-line Islamists will not deal

with the regime, so the regime will not deal with them – except with guns and bombs. The gulf between them will not easily be bridged.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for believing that negotiations must eventually take place. Most of the external actors, whichever side they are on, are increasingly worried at the prospect of regional destabilisation. The violence has already spilled over into Lebanon, is threatening Jordan, has added to Iraq's very considerable woes, and has given Turkey an acute headache as it struggles to cope with a resurgence of Kurdish militancy as well as with a massive influx of Syrian refugees. In Ankara, voices are being raised criticising Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his violent and perhaps over-hasty condemnation of the Syrian regime. The latest statements coming out of Turkey suggest a softening of Erdogan's position. More particularly, Turkey no longer seems to insist that President Bashar al-Asad quit the scene before a negotiation can take place.

The notion is also taking root in both Syrian camps that there can be no military solution to this conflict – in other words, that neither side can hope to score an outright victory. The regime has been destabilised but not toppled. The Syrian state remains more or less intact, shored up by its army and officer corps, by its powerful security services, by Ba'th Party networks across the country, by an army of still largely loyal civil servants, by the support of minorities and of part at least of the silent majority, which does not approve of the regime but fears what might come after it.

The rebels had expected an external military intervention in their favour on the Libyan model, but have been bitterly disappointed. No one wants to intervene militarily in Syria -- not the United States, nor Turkey, nor the European states, still less the Arab states. But without an external intervention the rebels cannot hope to defeat the Syrian army. The rebels would be mistaken to place their hopes in a Mitt Romney presidency in the United States. Romney is even more hostile than President Barack Obama to militant Islam, and is equally opposed to an American military intervention.

Indeed, the Syrian opposition should note that the U.S. has started to deny vehemently that it is coordinating military deliveries to the rebels or

has supplied them, as some reports have claimed, with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Washington is worried at the prospect of Syria turning into another Afghanistan and is aghast at the thought that it might be seen to be fighting on the same side as Al-Qaida!

From the start the external onslaught on Syria has been tied to the parallel onslaught on Iran. Israel has been pushing the U.S. to bring down the regime in Tehran in much the same way as it pushed the U.S. to bring down Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. Obama has managed to resist Israel's war-mongering, but only by imposing unprecedented sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Although these are now crippling the economy and inflicting pain on the population the regime still appears to be reasonably solid. In 2003, Britain was misguided enough to join the U.S. in the invasion of Iraq. It has no wish to make the same mistake again. On the basis of legal advice that an attack on Iran would be unlawful, it has informed the U.S. that it will not provide access to its bases in Cyprus and Diego Garcia in the event of any such attack.

One way and another, the danger of a military attack on Iran has receded. There have even been reports that the U.S. and Iran have engaged in secret bilateral exchanges, which raise the prospect of more ambitious negotiations after the American elections – if, that is, Obama is re-elected. Any breakthrough of that nature would be good news for a negotiated settlement in Syria.

Two other important factors need to be noted. Egypt led by President Muhammad Morsi has reappeared on the world stage after decades of subservience to the United States and Israel. Morsi is striving to put together a regional contact group to promote a negotiated transition of power in Damascus. Perhaps even more significant is the increasingly assertive role of Russia in the Syrian crisis. It has denounced the West for its hypocrisy in calling for a ceasefire while arming the rebels and it has offered to host negotiations in Moscow.

The crisis has show that the United States, long the dominant external power in the Middle East, can no longer impose its will unilaterally on the

region. It must take account of the wishes and interests of others, Russia prominent among them.

But, at the end of the day, it is up to the Syrians themselves to decide when the killing has to stop. It is Syrians who are dying; it is their homes, factories, schools and hospitals which are being shattered; it is the future of their country as a key regional player standing up for Arab interests against the ambitions of Israel and the United States which is being gravely compromised. It is surely time for Syrians to recognise that blind hate must be replaced by dialogue, mutual concessions and an attempt, however difficult, at reconciliation.

Ends.