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concurrent devolution of power regionally and
military action against genocidal fighters
nationally**

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Proposition for ending the crisis in Syria: concurrent devolution of power regionally and military action against genocidal fighters nationally

by [Ahmed E. Souaiaia](#)*

Politics is the art of compromise. Successful politicians rarely give ultimatums because doing so would limit their ability to navigate complex issues. In 2012, President Obama misread the complexity of the crisis in Syria. He drew a “red line” for President Assad: the use of chemical weapons would have “enormous consequences” and would “change [his] calculus” on American military intervention in Syria’s civil war. A year later, someone used weaponized chemicals, killing hundreds of civilians. Although no investigation was conducted to identify the perpetrator at that time, the U.S., pressured by its regional allies like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, accused the government of Bashar al-Assad. Just days before world leaders were to meet in New York, U.S. bombing of Syria was all but certain. Then two key events changed the course of history. First, Prime Minister David Cameron, initially supportive of military intervention, was restrained by the British parliament. As of September 7, 2013, the U.S. Congress was also set to not authorize the use of force in Syria, especially if it was not authorized by the UNSC. Second, U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, made a “silly mistake”, to borrow the words of some observers.

On Monday, September 9, 2013, Kerry, then on his way to a meeting in Europe, made the gaffe that saved his boss. Answering a reporter’s question, he said that Assad could avoid an American attack by turning over “every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next

week.” The State Department tried to take back Kerry’s comments by saying that he “was making a rhetorical argument about the impossibility and unlikelihood of Assad turning over chemical weapons he has denied he used.” Nonetheless, Russia’s President, Vladimir Putin, put Kerry in check: Moscow urged Syria to place its chemical weapons under international control. The next day, the Syrian government “welcomed” Russia’s proposal. The U.S. Senate, having scheduled a vote for Wednesday on whether to back a proposed punitive strike, postponed it. The U.S.-planned “surgical strike” against Syria did not take place.

In hindsight, and given the abysmal results of the yearlong airstrikes on ISIL, the U.S. administration should be thankful for Russia’s intervention that allowed Obama to save face, while eliminating a dangerous weapon that could be used by the Syrian government or its opponents if storing facilities fell under their control. Above all, Russia’s plan for Syria’s chemical weapons was a lifeline for President Obama, who was headed for defeat, at least in the House, on his request for approval for military action.

Fast-forward to September 2015. Russia, once again, might be offering the U.S. a lifeline: an opening to chart a new course for its military and political plans in Syria. Clearly, U.S. bombardment of ISIL positions from the air is not producing any results, and the U.S. cannot find a reliable

“moderate” partner that could hold cleared territory.

Since the start of the Syrian crisis, the U.S. and its regional allies—Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey—have insisted that Bashar al-Assad must step down before they stop their support for rebel fighters. In fact, the AKP-led Turkish government has insisted that it would not fight ISIL unless it and its allies are allowed to fight the Syrian government troops as well. In other words, working with the Syrian government to combat terrorism is out of the question in the eyes of these governments. Russia, on the other hand, has insisted that fighting terror groups in Syria must be coordinated with the Syrian government.

There is a growing body of evidence pointing to the fact that U.S.-Saudi position is untenable.

First, Turkey is now fighting its own war on terror at home. ISIL suicide bombers have killed Turkish citizens inside Turkey. The AKP government chose to re-open its war on Kurdish fighters and ignore the threats posed by ISIL. Some Turkish towns are now off-limits to Turkish government forces.

Second, the U.S. plan to train and equip “moderate” rebel fighters and use them to fight ISIL on the ground in Syria has failed in a spectacular way: the first group of fighters inserted into Syria was immediately attacked by al-Nusra, killing many of its members and capturing the rest. Moreover, a leader of this U.S.-trained group declared that his fighters will never attack their “brothers in jihad,” which of course would include ISIL.

Third, al-Nusra has been reluctant to enter into open war against ISIL. Last week, al-Nusra’s overall leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, ordered the group to cooperate with ISIL, despite his rejection of ISIL’s declared restoration of the caliphate under the leadership of al-Baghdadi.

Fourth, Saudi Arabia has claimed that Assad lost legitimacy because he has killed civilians in Syria. Now that Saudi Arabia is bombing civilians in Yemen and siding with an unelected ruler of that country, they have lost that moral high ground. The Saudis, Qataris, Bahrainis, and Emiratis are all involved in an illegal brutal war. It is possible that that Saudi Arabia will lose territory to the Houthis before the war on Yemen is over. The Saudi rulers themselves might face serious criminal charges since they stand accused of committing war crimes in Yemen.

Fifth, the refugee crisis is spreading to Europe, and the longer the crisis in Syria is made to last the more people will be leaving that country. Only an end to the violence and the creation of an international recovery plan could stop the flow of refugees. The countries that supported the armed rebellion are responsible for the humanitarian disaster and for recovery costs.

Sixth, even if President Assad were to step down or be removed, there is no evidence that members of the warring factions will stop fighting, lay down their arms, and go back to doing what they were doing before the crisis. Events in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen indicate that armed groups are intent on taking over and holding territories. These non-state actors are not wrestling away

control over towns and cities from government forces only, but also from each other. These groups do not believe in the devolution of power, they want all power through the gun.

The war in Syria is a classic proxy war. Too many states have too many proxy fighters all fighting the Syrian state and each other. Relying on non-state actors to carry out violence against the state is a dangerous and destabilizing strategy that will affect not only the target country, but other nations in the region and around the world. Violence will reach neighboring nations like Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan and the refugee crisis will continue to affect Western countries. The war in Syria and Iraq must end in order to minimize the spread of violence and the increased number of displaced people. However, for the war to end, states party to this conflict must employ both military and political strategies concurrently—not just one or the other.

The concurrent military and political solution is necessitated by the following facts:

1. The Syrian government will not be able to re-establish pre-crisis conditions. Too many people have died, too many people have been displaced, there has been too much destruction, and there is too little trust and good will—making it impossible to start a reconciliation and recovery phase without the inclusion of local leaders.

2. Syria has been flooded with all kinds of weapons and ammunitions, making the task of keeping peace and order all over Syria a herculean one. The government will need some of the armed groups to manage some

of the towns and cities that were outside the control of the Syrian state.

3. Syria has always been a mixed society. The country consists of an amalgam of sectarian, religious, ethnic, and tribal communities. During the crisis, and when the government failed to protect all citizens in all of Syria, these communities armed their own local committees (*lijan sha`biyya/difa` dhati*) to defend their towns and cities of residence. It is unlikely that these traumatized communities will disarm immediately and trust their fate to this or a future government—with or without Assad.

4. While some armed groups are interested in preserving the diversity of the Syrian society, other fighters who embrace and practice genocidal ideas, like ISIL, al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham are determined to cleanse the regions they control of ethnic, sectarian, religious, secular, and any group that is not them. Moreover, these genocidal groups do not believe in any degree of public participation in electing regional or national political and administrative leaders.

These facts create a set of conditions and variables that require a concurrent military and political solution. A solution that supports the national government's fight against genocidal fighters and put Syria on a path to deliberate devolution of power. The devolution of power could be achieved through purposeful political reform that would allow towns and cities a healthy degree of autonomy without risking the territorial integrity of their country and the abrupt collapse of the state. The fate and future of Assad and his government can be determined after regional governments have

been established, through national elections under a new constitution that reflects the new conditions.

The Russian military buildup in Syria might provide the world community with an opportunity to start an effective collective plan of action in Syria. The Western coalition that has been bombing ISIL from the air for more than one year without success could have another partner, who is not the Assad regime, on the ground. Russian troops could open the necessary channel of communication between the Western coalition and the Syrian government. Together, and after securing authorization from and monitoring by the UNSC, the Syrian and Russian troops could secure local elections in towns and cities freed from genocidal fighters. These local elections will provide opposition figures with a chance to gain power over regions where they have influence and if they have influence.

This approach will necessarily mean that Kurdish regions, Shia towns and cities, and tribal communities (*asha'ir*) will emerge as self-governing semi-autonomous regions within Syria. This kind of solution would preserve Syria's state institutions, offer Syria's minorities a degree of self-rule, and fight genocidal warriors. A Saudi-Western solution preconditioned on the removal of Assad and his generals will cause the disintegration of Syria, the permanent displacement of millions of Syrians, and the spread of violence to neighboring states. In the end, peace in Syria depends on a gradual devolution of power along with diminished the use of violence by non-state actors. It cannot depend on using those non-state actors simply as tools for regime change.

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