

# Syria at a Crossroads

The Obama administration is finally making sounds about a reasonable peace deal for Syria accepting the principle that the Syrians should choose their own leaders but words are cheap and a Saudi official makes clear that “regime change” remains the obsession, as Nicolas J S Davies explains.

By Nicolas J S Davies

The Vienna Communiqué – issued on Friday by 17 countries, the United Nations and the European Union – provides a diplomatic framework for peace in Syria. In this document, the external powers who have poured weapons, fighters and money into a disastrous and failed “regime change” policy in Syria for more than four years have signed on to what could be a realistic basis for peace.

The agreement begins with a commitment to “Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character,” and then invites “the United Nations to convene representatives of the Government of Syria and the Syrian opposition for a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections.” Critically, the agreement stipulates that, “This political process will be Syrian led and Syrian owned, and the people of Syria will decide the future of Syria.”

But of course, that is exactly what nearly all these countries already agreed to in the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012, under the leadership of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. That proved to be Annan’s final peace effort after the U.S. and its allies had rebuffed and undermined the peace plan he unveiled in April 2012 (see my October 2012 article).

Instead of pressuring their proxies in Syria to agree to the Annan peace plan, the U.S. and its allies organized what French officials called a “Plan B,” the Orwellian “Friends of Syria” meetings, where they pledged an unconditional flow of money, weapons and diplomatic support to their proxy forces in Syria.

Annan expected the Geneva Communiqué to be formalized in a UN Security Council resolution within weeks. Instead, when the parties reassembled in New York, the U.S. and its allies resurrected their demands for President Bashar al-Assad’s removal. In an echo of the Iraq debates in 2002-2003, they rejected a Russian resolution based on the Geneva Communiqué and drafted one of their own that included provisions designed to set the stage for a UN authorization for the use of force.

But after watching the destruction of Iraq and Libya, Russia and China would not

let the authority of the UNSC be co-opted to give a veneer of legitimacy to yet another murderous and destabilizing U.S.-led regime change.

Annan resigned as UN envoy, and the war ground on to kill at least 250,000 people, destroy much of Syria and turn 11 million people into desperate and homeless refugees.

Haytham Manna is the Paris-based spokesman for Syria's National Coordinating Body for Democratic Change (NCB), a coalition of the mainly leftist opposition groups who launched peaceful protests in Syria during the Arab Spring in 2011. The NCB opposes both the Assad regime and the foreign-backed rebels in Syria, and it has remained committed to three basic principles: non-violence; non-sectarianism; and opposition to foreign intervention.

Haytham Manna spoke to Le Vif, Belgium's largest French-language news magazine, in 2013. "The Americans have cheated," Manna told *Le Vif*. "Two or three times they have withdrawn at the very moment an agreement was in the works. ... Everything is possible, but that will depend mainly on the Americans. The French are content to follow. A political solution is the only one that could save Syria."

Despite conciliatory statements by Secretary of State John Kerry that President Assad need not be excluded from a political transition, it is not clear yet whether the U.S. and its allies have really changed their position since 2012.

On the morning of the Vienna meeting, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir reiterated the Saudi position on Assad to the BBC's Lyse Doucet, "He will go. There is no doubt about it. He will go. He will go either through a political process or he will be removed by force. There is no doubt that he will go."

Doucet suggested to Jubeir that the U.S. and U.K. were adopting a more conciliatory position, but Jubeir was adamant that he was expressing "the consensus among the allied countries":

"I believe the position of the countries in the coalition is really a unanimous one. What we are saying is that, at the beginning of the process, it has to be clear to the Syrian people that Bashar Al-Assad will leave by a date certain. It can't be probable, it can't be possible, it has to be certain. And then that date will depend on how quickly one can transition power to the Governing Council and how quickly one can take over the security forces in Syria to ensure that the security forces don't collapse and the civil institutions don't collapse."

Jubeir spoke in terms that U.S. officials would be careful not to use in public right now, but may well be using behind closed doors in discussions with allies

like the Saudis. The picture he paints looks very much like post-invasion Iraq, complete with an unelected "Governing Council" and a plan to "take over" the security forces.

Such a plan, which Jubeir claims would prevent Syria's collapse, reflects the self-serving and untested claims of U.S. neocons that the invasion of Iraq could have succeeded if only they hadn't disbanded the Iraqi Army. A U.S.-Saudi attempt to "take over" the Syrian military, which has loyally defended Syria against their proxy forces for four years, weaves the neocons' wishful thinking into a dangerous fantasy that could succeed only in igniting a further escalation of the war.

The apparent difference between the U.S. and Saudi positions raises difficult questions, ones on which the success or failure of the Vienna initiative may well depend. Veteran Middle East correspondent Charles Glass explained the analytical conundrum to *Democracy Now* last week,

"The U.S. seems to have lost some control over its allies in the region. On the surface, the United States is fighting against the Islamic State mainly because it went into Iraq. They didn't seem to mind when they were just in Syria. But they're still allowing Turkey to keep its border open for men and supplies to come into the Islamic State. And ... they're still allowing ... the Islamic State and ... other similar jihadist groups of al-Qaeda to receive weapons, including anti-tank weapons, from the Saudis. ... (E)ither this is fine with American policy and consistent with it, or they've simply lost control over the course of events."

So is this a case of the U.S. losing control over the course of events, or is the U.S. just playing "good cop" to the Saudis' "bad cop" as part of a coordinated policy? Or are there elements of both at work? It is a U.S. priority to maintain its position as the leader of the Western and Arab royalist alliance in the Middle East, and that sometimes means positioning itself at the head of the parade rather than actually directing it.

But having staked its leadership on successfully removing President Assad from power, it has never before wavered on that ultimate goal, even as unanticipated events like the Islamic State's move back into Iraq have made it much more complicated.

By fighting a "disguised, quiet, media-free" proxy war in Syria, U.S. officials have been able to invoke plausible deniability in the corrupt Western media. Many Americans see their government as guilty of inaction rather than of a murderous and destabilizing intervention in Syria.

Although over 250,000 war deaths in Syria have been spread among soldiers, rebels and civilians, (as of June 2013, an estimated 43 percent of the dead were Syrian soldiers and militiamen) U.S. domestic propaganda blames the Syrian government, or President Assad personally, for all the violence. Few Americans blame their own government or themselves, despite the well-documented U.S. role in supporting, prolonging and escalating the bloodshed.

While a political transition that led to free and fair elections would very likely bring new and different leaders to power in Syria, President Assad is not as unpopular as we have been led to believe. The Syrian army has fought loyally for four years, and a Qatari-funded YouGov opinion poll in December 2011 found that 55 percent of Syrians wanted Assad to remain in power, even as NATO planes were already flying in fighters and weapons from Libya to Turkey to overthrow his government.

So the U.S. and its allies may reasonably fear that a political transition which genuinely followed the roadmap laid down in Geneva and Vienna might leave important elements of the existing government in place.

On the other hand, when *Le Vif* asked Haytham Manna of the NCB about President Assad's future in 2013, he replied, "He won't stay. If the negotiations succeed, they will lead to a parliamentary regime. ... But let me say this: when we are talking about massacres of minorities, and the president is a member of a minority, how can you ask him to resign or not to resign?"

"Today, Western policy has reinforced his position as the defender of Syrian unity and of minorities. But having said that, nobody will be able to claim victory: the violence has become so blind that it will take an expanded front of the opposition and the regime to end it."

If there are real differences between the U.S. and Saudi positions, the U.S. surely has leverage as the Saudi kingdom's main weapons supplier and most important military ally to prevent it from derailing a diplomatic process that other countries support. But it seems more likely that the U.S. and the Saudis are still working together, as Jubair implied, to take charge of a political transition in Syria and to try to ensure that their proxies end up in control of the country.

If the involvement of Russia, China and Iran prevents the U.S. and its allies from hijacking a political transition in Syria, will our leaders simply opt for carrying on with the war, as they did in July 2012? To paraphrase Haytham Manna, will the Americans cheat again?

On the heels of the Iran nuclear agreement, we are entering the beginning of yet

another historic and fateful showdown between war and diplomacy, with the future of Syria – and maybe the future of U.S. foreign policy – on the line.

**Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.**

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