

Endgame in Syria

by Mahesh Sachdev

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The seven-year-old Syrian conflict has recently seen a flurry of political activity toward a possible denouement. Following the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) at Abu Kamal, its last Syrian redoubt, military activities are being framed by the tenuous ceasefire between government-allied forces and motley rebel groups mostly confined to four de-escalation zones. Backed by support from the Russian Air Force, Iranian experts and fighters from Hezbollah militia of Lebanon, the former have an upper hand.

The rebels, with the solitary exception of Kurdish forces, have been losing ground, with their foreign patrons, mainly the U.S. and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, becoming more equivocal. The antagonists have been inconclusively engaged in the Astana Process, sponsored and guaranteed by Russia, Iran and Turkey, and the U.N.-sponsored Geneva Peace Talks. The conflict has taken a horrific toll: over a third of nearly 19 million Syrians have been displaced, nearly a fifth have sought refuge outside the country, and over 400,000 are dead.

Russia's role

Russian President Vladimir Putin has pressed the military advantage in Syria to recently launch the search for a lasting political solution. His summit with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at Sochi, Russia, on November 20 produced the broad outlines of a peace process even as the Syrian leader insisted on foreign non-interference. Following telephonic consultations with his U.S., Saudi, Egyptian and Israeli counterparts, Mr. Putin held a tripartite summit on November 22 with the Presidents of Iran and Turkey. They jointly announced the convening of a Syrian peace congress at Sochi to create a framework for national reconciliation. In tandem with the Russian initiatives, a Saudi--sponsored two-day meeting in Riyadh of over 140 Syrian rebels concluded yesterday with an agreement to field a unified delegation at the Geneva talks on November 28. They reportedly dropped their long-standing demand for the removal of President Assad which could help break the stalemate at the talks.

However, there are still formidable obstacles. First, the bloodletting and intense foreign involvement have created a bitter legacy to be overcome before meaningful negotiations can commence. Second, entrenched foreign interests often pursue divergent objectives. For instance, while Turkey demands the ouster of Mr. Assad and regards the Kurdish militia as terrorists, Russia and Iran hold opposite stands. Even though Russia and the U.S. have vowed to obliterate the IS, they hold opposite positions on the continuation of Mr. Assad. Similarly, though Israel and Saudi Arabia have their well-known differences, they are both apprehensive about Iranian gains in the Levant. Third, even as a need for a new Syrian Constitution is widely acknowledged, the prescriptions for a future polity range from a continuation of Ba'ath Arab nationalism (aka an Alawite-dominated military-security apparatus) to a Sunni Khilafat, and from a unitary republic to a loose confederation. At a different level, as Syria is the first instance of Russian military intervention abroad since the end of the Cold War, it has provoked speculation about Mr. Putin's more muscular regional

and global agenda. Last but not least, any peace package would necessarily require the injection of huge funds for reconstruction. Unless the peace dividend is visible soon, regression to anarchy cannot be ruled out.

Whiff of optimism

The best one can realistically hope for is a congruence of major players around the incipient political process, and progressive withdrawal of foreign military presence and interests. Left to themselves, exhausted and pauperised Syrians may come around to let bygones be bygones and create new paradigms for peaceful coexistence. There is some room for guarded optimism: Syrians have an ancient civilisation which has always been multi-ethnic and mostly serene. Further, their bitter experience provides a cautionary lesson. The current stalemate also shows the limits of those calling for regime change by force. Indeed, some of them may be bracing themselves for aftershocks as war-hardened fighters come home from Syria's killing fields. It may be better to de-escalate than risk Syria becoming a crucible for extremism.

At the regional level, the endgame in Syria puts paid to a decade of the "Arab Spring" without any tangible gains. It also re-enforces the unshakable Arab faith in conspiracy theories of foreign powers being the ultimate arbiters of their destiny. Ironically, the Syrian conflict will reach its endgame in the centenary year of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the infamous Balfour Declaration. As they say, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

A place for India

By keeping a low profile during the conflict, India has earned wider acceptability across the Syrian social spectrum. In normal times, the annual bilateral trade between the two countries was over half a billion dollars, with India enjoying a large trade surplus. In a post-conflict situation, India has a potential role in institution building and reconstruction. Among the possible initiatives to further our prospects could be extending an invitation to Mr. Assad for a return visit to India, holding a session of the joint commission and an Indian line of credit to finance our exports as well as projects and services.

Mahesh Sachdev, a retired Indian Ambassador with specialisation in West Asia, is President of Eco-Diplomacy and Strategies, a consultancy.