

Syria, a vital proposal

PAUL ROGERS 7 February 2014

The Geneva conference offers little hope of a breakthrough to halt Syria's nightmare. This makes a different approach all the more urgent.

The first round of the Geneva II talks on Syria ended with no real progress, though arrangements for limited evacuation of civilians from the besieged city of Homs will give welcome [relief](#) to a few. The [meeting](#) is due to reconvene on 10 February, amid continuing violence across much of Syria. Bashar al-Assad's regime seems uninterested in serious negotiations, while the rebel participants are hardly representative of the opposition as a whole. They certainly do not speak for the more [radical](#) Islamists; one such group, ISIL, may have been quite badly damaged by [attacks](#) from other rebel groups but others on the Islamist wing continue to provide the strongest opposition to Damascus.

The military situation on the ground offers numerous indications that the regime is [holding](#) its own, and has even grown stronger over the past year. The director of national intelligence in Washington, James D Clapper, says the regime has gained even as massive damage has been done to the country (see Michael R Gordon & Mark Mazzetti, "[Assad strengthens grip on Syria, U.S. security chief says](#)", *International New York Times*, 6 January 2014). The victims of this damage include the most vulnerable. A United Nations report confirms what non-government groups such as [Every Casualty](#) have found, that at least 10,000 children have been killed, The UN also identifies frequent torture and abuse of children; most of this is [perpetrated](#) by pro-government forces, but much evidence exists of appalling acts by rebel factions.

After nearly three years of intense violence there is no prospect of an end, and as it continues many governments across the region and beyond are hugely concerned at the risk of it spreading to more countries. The ongoing turmoil in Iraq is already intimately connected to the Syrian war; [tensions](#) in Lebanon remain high; there are many examples of dedicated young *ihadists* moving to Syria from countries across the region.

A relevant proposal

The latter aspect of the war causes particular concern to western governments who see the prospect of combat-hardened young men from their own countries eventually returning home and potentially engaging in militant actions. The numbers involved are difficult to assess, but a normally well informed, and certainly detailed analysis puts it in the many thousands (see Raffaello Pentucci, "[Foreign Fighters: Battle-hardened Europeans return from Syria](#)", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 2014).

This is not a short-term matter. A CIA assessment, reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, indicates that the war "could last another decade or more" (see Adam Entous & Siobhan Gorman, "[Behind Assad's Comeback, a Mismatch in Commitments](#)", *Wall Street Journal*, 31 December 2013). [Pentucci's](#) analysis concludes: "The foreign fighter

contingent in Syria is likely to match this timescale and is therefore likely to be at the heart of Europe's militant threat for the next five years at least - a period of time that will only increase the longer the conflict continues."

Such assessments are the main reason for western governments' concern. At the same time the complex nature of the international involvement in the war leans strongly against [progress](#) towards a settlement. For this to become feasible, the Syrian combatants would need to be ready to negotiate seriously, and the regime's supporters (Moscow and Tehran) and the rebels' backers (Paris, London, Washington and especially Riyadh) would have to work in a united manner. Both shifts look remote just now (see "[Syria at Geneva II: the missing proxy](#)", 23 January 2014).

Amid all of this, the [UN](#) continues to try to provide some substantial [aid](#) and is also doing its best to promote dialogue (particularly through its very experienced facilitator, [Lakhdar Brahimi](#)). But as so often in the past, the UN has little capacity for any kind of agreed policing action on the ground. It does have a great deal of peacekeeping experience, and some current UN deployments in central Africa are more robust than in the past; but there is no standing capability that could have allowed for intervention in Syria in the crucial early [months](#) of the conflict.

Peace operations authorised under [Chapter VII](#) include a mandate to protect civilians. In practice these may be well intentioned and by no means always ineffective, but they rely on standby arrangements and are dependent on commitments from individual states that may take months to implement. With such qualifications in mind, calls for the establishment of a [United Nations Emergency Peace Service \(UNEPS\)](#) are timely, and the unfolding disaster in Syria make them ever more relevant.

A different option

The Canadian peace researcher [H Peter Langille](#) has worked on this issue for many years. Indeed, much of the creative thinking on this issue has been Canadian in origin, and though the current government in Ottawa shows little interest the ideas have been developed by non-western countries such as Brazil.

At an earlier stage of Syria's armed conflict, Langille wrote a cogent summary of his thinking in openDemocracy (see [H Peter Langille, "A UN emergency peace service?"](#), 14 May 2012). It concludes:

"The core principles underlying the UNEPS proposal are that it be: a permanent standing integrated UN formation: highly trained and well-equipped; ready for immediate deployment upon authorization of the UN Security Council; multidimensional (civilian, policy and military); multifunctional (capable of diverse assignments with specialised skills for security, humanitarian, health and environmental crises); composed of 16,000 dedicated personnel (recruited professionals, selected, trained and employed by the UN); developed to ensure regional and gender equitable representation; collated at a designated UN base under an operational headquarters and two mobile mission headquarters; at sufficient strength to operate in high-threat environments; and a service to complement existing UN and regional arrangements."

This proposal is far beyond current realities. And the existence of an effective UNEPS in 2011-12 might not have been able to intervene in a way that prevented Syria's descent into chaos. But the important thing is that such a capability is absent, and this precludes an UNEPS-style [approach](#) from even being considered - in relation to Syria, but also to any crisis, anywhere, that might be developing into out-and-out conflict.

If the CIA is right and the Syrian war still has far to go, the outlook is appalling indeed: ever greater human [costs](#) and economic devastation, and the potential for regional escalation. This makes it all the more important that serious

attention is paid to an alternative approach - and a handful of countries really determined to push it, coordinating their efforts in the process, could begin to have an effect.

That will require bold political leadership of the kind the Syria crisis desperately needs. If it is not forthcoming, the opportunity lost - in Syria and elsewhere - may haunt the world for decades.

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