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## **No End to Syria's Agony in Sight?**

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Where Syria is concerned, the fog of diplomacy has tended to be almost as thick as the fog of war. But earlier this month, through that fog, a cessation of hostilities and a "Syrian-led political process" suddenly looked possible. There were several reasons for that.

Intensive contacts between the United States' and Russian foreign ministers appeared to have yielded an agreement on the delimitation of areas under the control of the moderate ("patriotic") Syrian opposition, and on the terms of a cessation of hostilities between Syrian government and moderate opposition forces.

The Syrian government had been recovering ground from rebels and seemed poised to drive extremist ("jihadi") forces out of Aleppo once the separation of moderates from extremists had been achieved. The government, consequently, was approaching a point where it could heed international pressure for political negotiations without incurring the risk of being a big loser at the negotiating table.

Moderate rebels appeared to have an interest in a political process getting under way while they are still in control of some Syrian territory.

Turkey had ceased to be a supplier of arms and a conduit for recruits to two extremist groups: Jabhat Fateh al Sham and ISIS. Instead the Turkish government had sent mobile army units into northern Syria and these were conducting operations against extremist rebels (and against Kurdish forces, it has to be said). In addition, some Turkish government statements had hinted that Turkey's president might be ready to accept a continuing role for President al-Assad in the government of Syria.

Saudi Arabia, a partner of Turkey during the years when both were determined to overthrow President al-Assad, and were lavishing arms and money on rebel groups, was preoccupied with problems at home and in Yemen, and was no longer a major rebel supplier.

It was clear that Iran would be content with an outcome that allowed a continuing role for Alawites and other non-Sunni elements in the government of Syria. The Iranian interest is to avoid Syria becoming dominated by Saudi-oriented Sunnis that would be hostile to Shia Iran, since that would put at risk an Iranian deterrent in its cold war with Israel: its relationship with Lebanon's Hezbollah.

The EU has a very strong collective interest in a settlement that will staunch Syrian refugee flows and in time open up the possibility of refugees returning to Syria.

Nearly three weeks later, however, the outlook is far less promising.

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Relations between the United States and Russia have curdled following a US bombardment of Syrian army units near Deir as-Zour and a strike on a UN aid convoy heading for Aleppo. The Russians believe that the US attack was deliberate. The Americans believe that Russian forces carried out the attack on the UN convoy.

These beliefs are symptomatic of a deep distrust that has complicated the Syrian diplomacy of the United States and Russia. The Russians suspect the Americans of wanting to protect some extremist groups, and of harbouring plans to have President al-Assad overthrown by moderate and extremist forces as soon as the risk of an ISIS take-over of Syria has been eliminated. The Americans suspect the Russians of deliberate targeting of moderate groups and of a lack of commitment to ending hostilities.

The reality may be that neither Russia nor the United States have as much influence over their respective clients as the Kerry-Lavrov agreement of 9 September implied.

Lurking in the background is a Kurdish problem. Kurdish forces have occupied northern Syria between the border with Iraq and the Euphrates, in the process proving themselves effective foes of ISIS. They will wish to retain control of this territory through some form of arrangement for Kurdish autonomy, and may well be counting on US support for that. But an autonomous Syrian Kurdistan along much of Turkey's southern border would be intolerable for the Turkish government, and is unlikely to be welcome to any future Syrian government.

Also, Israel's Syrian objectives are unclear. Israel may well be torn between recognising that under President al-Assad and his father Syria has been inclined to "peaceful co-existence" since 1973, and overthrowing a government that is friendly to Iran and affords Iran strategic depth..

So the Syrian civil war looks set to drag on for a while longer, and at this point it is more likely to end in victory for the Syrian government than in victory for the opposition. But one of three things could change that:

- The current US administration could overcome inter-agency differences and achieve the separation of forces agreed by Kerry and Lavrov on 9 September (which for almost a year has been one of the most important Russian demands). This would put the Syrian government under pressure to cease hostilities against moderate rebels;
- The next US administration could decide to intervene militarily on the side of the rebels. Inevitably this would be an unauthorised act of aggression, in violation of the UN Charter, but Mrs Clinton has threatened to do so within hours of becoming President. This would probably return the upper hand to the opposition;
- Moscow, alert to this risk, wanting to forestall US intervention, and aware of the danger of the Syrian government pursuing a "winner takes all" strategy, could decide to hammer out a new basis for agreement with the United States on the cessation of hostilities.

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