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# Syria: a roadmap to peace

Syrians need a regional settlement that is owned by the region – and the UN security council must make that happen



**David Owen**

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A Free Syrian Army fighter in Aleppo. 'This did not start as a civil war; it was a reflection of the Arab spring.'

Photograph: Reuters

The lesson of history for dealing with Syria in 2013 is to avoid a repeat of 1919. At the Paris conference dominated by the United States, Britain and France, Lloyd George was heard to say: "Mesopotamia ... yes ... oil ... irrigation ... we must have Mesopotamia [which was destined to be in Iraq]. Palestine ... yes. The Holy Land ... Zionism ... we must have Palestine. Syria ... hm; what is there in Syria? Let the French have that." Henceforth Damascus was under the French, and the Emir Faisal I, King of Greater Syria, was double-crossed, and with him, Lawrence of Arabia.

What is needed today is a regional settlement that is owned by the region. A conference that takes place in the region and can be seen as an inclusive process. The UN has already appointed the former Algerian foreign minister, Lakhdar Brahimi, as the

representative of the secretary general. He should chair a regional conference. It might be wiser for him to no longer also be the Arab League representative, for that body has chosen to fully support the Syrian opposition, which makes it very difficult for him to retain the necessary impartiality as chairman. The membership of the conference should involve all Middle East countries, including Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine, which would be expected to have representation from the West Bank and Gaza.

The UN negotiator would be assisted by the presence of the security council permanent five nations. The Syrian opposition will be represented, and the first item on the agenda would be the composition of that representation. Those present should be the equivalent of foreign secretary or their deputy, and the sooner they start meeting the better. The venue would best situated in the capital or capitals of one of the countries represented, but which do not border Syria.

The terms of reference would be peace in the region. The Syrian conflict would initially dominate the agenda but soon regional issues, trade-offs and solutions would play a part. There would be no preconditions but nothing should be excluded from emerging, neither federations of individual countries, nor parts of countries in the region, nor partition. There should be no hiding from the reality that the chances of such a conference succeeding would be greatly enhanced if the US secretary of state and his deputy were ready to devote considerable time to shuttle diplomacy in the region's capitals.

There comes a time in any conflict when its nature changes. This did not start as a civil war; it was a reflection of the Arab spring. Had there been unity among the permanent five in the security council, Kofi Annan, the first UN negotiator, might well have been able to prevent military action hardening and the development of civil war. It is pointless to go back over the missed opportunities, but an essential part of the design of this regional conference is that it should be able to be supported by Russia and China as well as the US.

It happens that for more than a year, I have been taking soundings with others, as part of an initiative undertaken by the European Leadership Network, on whether we could do anything to help further the establishment of a negotiation for weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East. The planned meeting in Helsinki last December, promised in the context of the non-proliferation treaty review conference, sadly, for many reasons, did not take place. But in the process I came to the firm conclusion that there was a readiness within the region for all countries to talk together about regional security.

With the situation in Syria deteriorating we now face a crisis over the use of chemical weapons. Many believe this issue on its own is of sufficient gravity to warrant a military

intervention. Others believe the EU embargo on arms supplies should be lifted. The surprising omission is any proposal for a negotiating forum. The reason for this is a deep pessimism that the continuing division of the permanent five in the security council can be resolved. I believe an urgently convened, inclusive regional security conference is perhaps the only framework which might provide a step-by-step solution over time to what is proving to be a long, drawn-out confrontation – and one that will almost certainly soon engulf neighbouring states.

Sending arms is unlikely to provide a solution. They are coming in anyhow to the Syrian opposition from Turkey and Jordan, paid for by Arab money and done with US, French and British support, if not direct involvement. The same applies to the Syrian government, to which arms are coming in from Iraq, despite the Kurds in northern Syria who have already been granted virtual autonomy from Bashar al-Assad. Also from Lebanon, where arms typically are going to both sides but probably in larger quantities from its Shia leaders than from Arab sources. The Shia arms supplies to Assad are in part direct from the Russians, in part direct from Iran, but with the support of China as well as Russia.

As always in these conflicts, people believe that morality favours one side, while both sides try to incriminate the other and indulge in agent provocateuring. The UN security council permanent five should stop the blame game and get on with their real responsibility – bringing the conflict to an end and hammering out a regional security involving far more than just Syria.

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