



## The New DIGITAL REVOLUTION

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### GLOBAL VIEWPOINT

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#### **DIPLOMATIC OPENING FOR IRAN CAN HELP END SYRIA CRISIS**

*Lord David Owen is a former British foreign secretary and was EU co-chairman of the peace negotiations in the former Yugoslavia from 1992 to 1995.*

**By David Owen**

LONDON — The eyes of the world are focused on the U.N. in New York this week in an amazing turnabout in international politics. We could have been in the midst of a Middle East war with the U.S. and France having attacked Syria, triggering resumed fighting across the border of southern Lebanon and Israel. Instead, the U.N. is back on center stage, the Security Council is functioning again, and its five permanent powers are in a constructive dialogue over chemical weapons in Syria for the first time in two and a half years.

And in an immensely encouraging sign, we have the presence in New York of the new president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, clearly intent on improving relations with the U.S. and President Obama and talking the language of peace on how to accommodate Iran's right to have a civil nuclear power program with respected non-proliferation treaty safeguards to prevent the manufacture of nuclear weapons.

It should be a source of pride to the British people that their democratic chamber of the House of Commons responded to their views and ignored the advice of their prime minister and foreign secretary. It is now crystal clear that the U.S. intention was to bomb Syria a few days after that debate, possibly as early as that weekend.

To find as historically significant a debate, one has to go back to the Second World War, to the second day of a no-confidence debate in the government on May 8, 1940, when the Labor Party, in opposition, announced that it would vote against Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. The government was not defeated, and what was significant was not the 30 Conservatives who voted against, but the 60 who abstained, forcing Chamberlain to resign and enabling Churchill to succeed him as prime minister.

Similarly, it was the 95 abstentions which ensured that Prime Minister David Cameron had no alternative but to accept that the U.K. would not participate in any bombing of Syria and paved the way for Obama to announce that he too would consult Congress. It also paved the way for the G20 meeting in St. Petersburg to provide the occasion for Obama to talk directly with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Syria and the subsequent U.S.-Russian diplomacy.

Now, this week in New York, diplomacy must move on to lay the foundation for a negotiated settlement of the long and bitter civil war in Syria. The crucial step is for the U.S. president to make it clear to the Iranian president that Iran would be welcome to participate in a Middle East conference on Syria. If Israel is also invited, so much the better, but that is a matter best left for these two presidents to discuss. The vital step is to involve Iran

involve Iran.

Why is it so vital to involve Iran? The reason is simple: realpolitik based on four facts. Iran is involved already on the ground with its elite Revolutionary Guard. Iran helps finance Russian-made arms for Syria. Iran has a crucial influence on Hezbollah, the Shiite fighters based in Lebanon who are also on the ground in Syria. Iran, as a Shia-majority country, is also close in religious terms to the Alawite minority in Syria, from whom the Assad regime, first the father and now the son, draws its strength.

Realpolitik is a tactical plan or conduct designed to deal with facts that are often difficult, even disobliging, to face up to. The most intangible conflicts often demand the practice of realpolitik, and its absence can both prolong and exacerbate conflict situations. The reason for creating five veto countries within the Security Council in 1945 was to reflect the realpolitik that was absent in the structure of the League of Nations once Woodrow Wilson found he could not convince the U.S. Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

Over Syria there has been a total failure of the Security Council to work towards a solution based on realpolitik. The U.S., U.K. and France have moralized while refusing to face uncomfortable facts. Namely, that after acquiescing in passing a resolution over Libya by abstention, Russia and China were not prepared to pass any similar resolution over Syria involving Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter. They feared such a resolution would be used again to force regime change. On grounds of realpolitik, Russia always had to be involved in creating the climate for a negotiated cease-fire and settlement in Syria. Over time, as a civil war emerged, events have demonstrated that just as Turkey, Iraq and Jordan have to be involved, so does Iran.

Why is it so urgent to start peace negotiations? The prime reason is that the map of which forces control territory in Syria is changing rapidly and in an adverse direction for a sustainable peace. The Assad forces are coming ever closer to imposing a partition line which is defensible yet has profound consequences. They still do not control the whole of the capital city, Damascus, but that could soon change. They do not yet quite control the whole border down south to Jordan and which abuts with the Palestinian West Bank and Israel, though they do control the border with Lebanon.

In the north and east of the country, the rise of the al-Qaeda-linked forces is becoming more apparent each day. Their black flag is evident everywhere, and the Syrian-based Kurds are having difficulty maintaining their position. The countries of the Middle East do not have time to develop a leisurely peace-negotiation timetable. Events on the ground are dictating the pattern of a future Middle East. We in the Western democracies cannot dictate the map or the nature of a settlement, but we can, with Russia and within the framework of the U.N., help to establish a negotiating process. As we saw in Bosnia from May 1993 to September 1995, delay created a far bigger mess than settling and compromising earlier. Now, this week in

New York, a pattern for peace can be set. Let us hope the dwindling opportunity is seized.

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