

David Owen: There is hope yet for us to broker a peace in Syria



Human cost: Syria's huge refugee crisis has dragged neighbouring countries into the peace process (Picture: AFP/Getty)

The conference on Syria planned for January 22 in Switzerland, convened by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, is the one hope left for a quick ceasefire. Yet that will be very difficult to achieve.

On humanitarian grounds, a genuine, monitored ceasefire is imperative — but realpolitik, some will argue, means there can be no ceasefire until exhaustion or victory. Also, ceasefire lines have a tradition of becoming permanent, leading to something too close to de facto partition as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or the emergence of a new country, as in Kosovo.

Yet civil war in Syria has reached the point where the only alternative to a ceasefire is a long drawn-out fight to the death, something which zealots like but civilians deplore. With Saudi money funding all Sunni groups in Syria including al Qaeda-

aligned ones, and Iran militarily involved, no end is in sight.

The problem with ceasefire lines is that they are so hard to draw. Each side prays in aid history and geography. There are few, if any, absolutes. Ideally the parties negotiate solutions with or without intermediaries — but to begin the process someone needs to kick-start a bold solution which can then be disputed by the parties.

In Switzerland the list of participants already indicates that this will be a regional conference — and rightly so. It is still not clear whether Israel and Iran will be around the table. Hopefully they both will be. This is neither the time nor place for non-regional powers to impose a map, as happened to Syria in the 1919 Paris peace negotiations. Ninety-five years later, those maps are in part responsible for the present conflict. The region must own any new map.

Gathering together all the experience of recent conflicts, there are lessons to be taken into consideration for Syria.

We must not pre-empt a long-term solution because of short-term ceasefire lines of demarcation. Seven or eight internal regional boundaries have more flexibility than two or three provinces.

And we must keep intact, as far as possible, existing administrative boundaries to help overcome immediate destruction and chaos. This also allows more players with local constituencies into the negotiating process.

In Syria there seem to be three high hurdles to be surmounted. There are three homelands that have to be recognised, made secure and basically become inviolate.

First, the Sunni population will have to believe that they will remain responsible for the administration and security of the town of Hama, now under al Qaeda control. Hama was shelled to virtual destruction in 1982, with 15,000 Sunni killed or seriously injured by President Hafez Assad.

Second, the Alawites have to believe that, going back to the 1925 precedent, they will remain responsible for the administration and security of the Jebel el Ansariye mountains to the Mediterranean and the towns of Latakia, Tartus, Telalakah and Homs.

Third, the Kurds will have to believe that, going back to the 1919 arguments about a Kurdish homeland and unfulfilled promises of a state, they will be responsible for the

administration and security of a part of the north-east bordered by Turkey and Iraq.

As for Damascus and parts of the Dimashq region, it is tempting to look for some mechanisms of joint or independent administration, as at one stage agreed for Sarajevo, but the history of such arrangements is not encouraging. Given the likely opposition of religious minorities to their perceived fragile security, it looks wiser to stick with the current situation, where some suburbs of Damascus will be, for a time at least, outside a unified city administration.

In Aleppo, held by the government forces, a hard bargain will have to be struck. For the government to concede Aleppo it will in exchange want occupied territory around Damascus and down to the frontier with Jordan.

Countries bordering Syria — Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq — will have views on what regional administrations they would prefer as neighbours. They cannot have the final say but given the horrendous refugee problem and the continuing need for humanitarian assistance and aid convoys from these countries, trust and working relationships will be crucial for years.

There is an undoubted role for UN monitoring of the ceasefire, particularly if the five permanent members will agree to send monitor teams. The close proximity of existing, by and large successful UN monitoring teams should allow for some of their members being seconded for immediate deployment. Experience shows that delay in deployment is very often deeply damaging.

Spelling out some of this detail runs the risk of making it appear easy to achieve. In reality the task is daunting. There is, however, no practical possibility of any ceasefire being imposed by external force. The conference will have to settle for what is feasible.

We can hope to forge an agreement stopping helicopters and planes from flying — something that could possibly be imposed. To stop bullets and shells will also require the evolution of a dialogue between military commanders in the field, who will have to try to control their rogue elements, and with local and national political leaders.

As a practical reality, under such arrangements as these the rule of the Assad family will cease to apply across more than half the country and maybe become a memory.

Some will say this is all impossible. Not so. We were told it would be impossible to get rid of chemical weapons without bombing — yet they are on track to be destroyed and abolished in Syria, because of co-operation between Russia and the US, helped by bombing being blocked by the British Parliament and the US Congress. Iran has a chance to demonstrate its traditional position as a country content to live within its existing boundaries. And now that the distrust and antagonism raised over Libya has eased, the UN Security Council is at long last working together.

Lord Owen is editor of Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Vance/Owen Peace Plan (Liverpool University Press, 2013).