EUROPEAN COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
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POLICY BRIEF

SYRIA: THE IMPERATIVE OF DE-ESCALATION

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SUMMARY

After more than two years of devastating destruction, a rare moment of opportunity has emerged in Syria following the US-Russian agreement to launch Geneva II. Europe must now get fully behind the peace initiative and reject the false choice between the supposed "military-lite" or "diplomacy-lite" options – that the military balance can be tipped without a weighty intervention, or that diplomacy can advance without having to deal with Assad or Iran. Instead, by promoting de-escalation and diplomacy, the West should prioritise ratcheting down violence and the threat of regional spill over.

A serious Geneva II effort requires three key elements: a set of guiding principles distilled from Geneva I; the support of a wide enough coalition; and a diplomatic strategy to get it off the ground. Effective diplomacy will demand unpalatable compromises aimed at securing sufficient international accord to nudge the warring parties towards the negotiating table. This will have to be inclusive in terms of both Syrian and regional participation – including engaging with Iran beyond the nuclear file. Western arming of rebels is ill-advised given its likely limited impact on the ground, encouragement of escalation and maximalism, and the inability to guarantee in whose hands weapons will end up. At the same time contingency planning for chemical weapons use or proliferation is necessary but is not a substitute for, or short-cut to, a solution for the crisis.

A rare moment of hope has been glimpsed in the otherwise bleak landscape of the past two years of conflict in Syria with the announcement on 7 May of a joint effort by United States Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to convene a peace conference to advance a political solution. It marks a turn away from the defeatism that has for too long characterised the Western debate about Syria. Wisely the international community has so far resisted military intervention – learning from recent experiences in the Muslim world and aware of the risks of an especially explosive mix of forces at play in Syria. This has been matched, though, by an unwillingness to make the uncomfortable compromises necessary for diplomacy. The peace conference initiative should be seized on as an opportunity to get beyond this paralysis.

Expectations of success are understandably muted, but this process offers the best hope of containing the violence that has already torn the country apart, deepened sectarian divisions, and threatened to spread to all of Syria's neighbours. Until the announcement, the West was in danger of sleepwalking into an ill-considered military involvement based on the questionable premise that a limited intervention – such as arming the rebels or introducing no-fly zones – could help to bring about a political settlement in Syria. But rather than opening the door to a political solution, this sort of "intervention-lite" is more likely to encourage escalation on both sides, deepen the civil war, and accelerate spillover to the wider region, while strengthening the resolve of external backers.

The reality is that, even after more than two years, neither the regime nor the rebels have been able to decisively seize the military ascendancy. Rebel momentum has been partially reversed. The rebels hold pockets of territory but almost no urban centres; they are incapacitated by internal divisions and unable to cement broader popular legitimacy – particularly among Syria's minorities and even the Sunni urban class. The regime, though clearly no longer able to rule the whole country, remains remarkably coherent. It has managed to avoid major defections to the opposition, retains significant fighting power, and has recently made some territorial gains.[1] Meanwhile, the civil war has been transformed into a wider regional and international struggle for power, with both sides increasingly dependent on external political and military support.

Against this backdrop, there are no easy answers. But as Western policymakers are struggling to find a way forward, much of the debate about Syria remains stuck in a make-believe choice between "intervention-lite" and "diplomacy-lite". The former is based on a belief that lifting the arms embargo and even support from air strikes can help hand-picked "moderate" opposition fighters tip the military balance and force President Bashar al-Assad to capitulate or leave. The latter is based on an assumption that a diplomatic process is possible in which Assad deferentially steps aside as regime and opposition elements without blood on their hands remake Syria according to a shared vision. If only it were so.

The real choice is now between two unsavoury paths: a full-scale intervention and a commitment to real diplomacy. A military option capable of settling the conflict decisively and opening a political path will require a far greater military commitment than the West has any appetite for and will come with both the need to do extensive "state-building" in Syria and huge risks of fanning an even wider conflict. If the West wants to use real diplomacy to stop or slow the killing, on the other hand, it will need to make unpalatable compromises – in particular, accepting that Assad's fate must be a question for the transition process, not a pre-condition or assumed outcome, and that Iran must play a role in the diplomatic process.

This paper argues that a policy of de-escalation backed by a diplomatic push towards elements of a regional grand bargain, aimed at pushing reluctant domestic actors towards the negotiating table, is the better option. This is not because of its political popularity or moral clarity but because it has greater potential to reduce the devastation, killing, and chance of regional contagion. As Syria descends deeper into the abyss, Europeans must ask themselves what their key objectives are and make hard choices about what matters most. If they want above all to ratchet down the violence and spread of sectarian conflict – as opposed to other favoured outcomes such as defeating Assad, giving birth to a democratic Syria, or weakening Iran – Europeans should focus on de-escalation and put all their efforts into making diplomacy work. Not all items on a Western wish list can be accorded the same weight or pursued with the same strategy – it is time to prioritise. Even if this approach will not immediately end the violence and cannot guarantee success, it is time to take this less-travelled path, which, one way or another, will eventually be employed to end the fighting.

There is an additional priority of rightful concern to trans-Atlantic decision-makers – the possible deployment or proliferation of chemical weapons. Chemical weapons pose a unique challenge given the humanitarian and homeland security implications. Claims of chemical weapons use, as yet unverified, are becoming more widespread, and most accusations point to government responsibility, with suspicions also of rebel use.[2] Deepening state disintegration increases the risk of them being put to immediate use, or being held by more radical elements for future domestic or international use. Contingency plans to rapidly secure chemical weapons if the need arises must be in place, including with relevant neighbours. But planning for chemical weapons scenarios should not be confused with delivering a solution to the overall Syria crisis, nor should the former be viewed as an entry point or shortcut to the latter.

This paper begins by setting out the dangers of managed escalation and then outlines an alternative strategy for de-escalation – setting out the principles on which it should be based, the coalition that must be assembled to back it, and the choreography for a Geneva II process.

The dangers of "managed escalation"

As the death toll has risen and the Assad government has become more entrenched, so too have the calls for a more muscular Western policy towards Syria. The debate has revolved around two models for managed military escalation: establishing no-fly zones or arming the rebels. Neither involves "boots on the ground", which is why they can best be characterised as "intervention-lite".[3] Supporters of these policies argue that they will make Assad more likely to step down, empower the so-called moderates among the opposition, and bring the war to a speedier conclusion. However, there is considerable evidence for such approaches being more likely to lead to a full-scale military intervention by the West, while making a political solution even more difficult to grasp.

1 Liz Sly, "Assad forces gaining ground in Syria", the *Washington Post*, 12 May 2013, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-forces-gaining-ground-in-syria/2013/05/11/79147c34-b99c-11e2-b568-6917f6ac6d9d_story.html.

2 See for example "Syria chemical weapons allegations", BBC, 17 May 2013, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22557347; "UN's Del Ponte says evidence Syria rebels 'used sarin'", BBC, 6 May 2013, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22424188

3 See Jeremy Herb, "McCain: Putting troops in Syria the 'worst thing United States could do'", the *Hill*, 28 April 2013, available at http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/296607-mccain-international-force-should-secure-syrian-chemical-weapons.

The no-fly-zones option

Western governments have long faced calls to undertake air strikes to knock out the regime's aerial firepower and to establish safe zones within Syria. Supporters of these policies have multiple goals, including tipping the balance in the military conflict in favour of the opposition, providing rebels with space to mobilise and organise, and creating safe havens for refugees in Syria, partially to relieve the strain placed on neighbouring countries.

However, it is unclear how much killing would be prevented. According to General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, only 10 percent of opposition casualties result from air strikes.[4] Moreover, safe zones could cement the collapse of the central state, and, given existing intra-rebel fighting, competing groups are likely to seek local control through violent means. As demonstrated by developments in some opposition-held areas in parts of northern Syria, this could render them anything but safe for the civilian population.[5] As noted by António Guterres, the UN high commissioner for refugees: "Bitter experience has shown that it is rarely possible to provide effective protection and security in such areas."[6]

Syria's collapse accelerated by the establishment of safe zones would also pose a danger to the territorial unity of neighbouring states, fuelling, for instance, existing tendencies towards militia-run zones in Lebanon and Iraq, and thereby potentially feeding a series of regional civil wars. Additionally, the act of establishing safe zones would be an act of war against Syria, with the obvious dangers of escalation and mission creep.

At the moment, leaders in Washington, London, Paris, and elsewhere explicitly reject this approach, but it continues to be supported by figures such as US senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, as well as by vocal commentators in the press. In fact, a better option for dealing with the refugee and IDP crisis will be a political process that is predicated on de-escalation and maintaining Syria's territorial integrity, among other things.

Arming the opposition

The second model, of arming the opposition, has stronger support in Western capitals. British and French officials are currently suggesting that arming rebels represents the best means of getting the opposition (and their regional allies) to come to the table. Supporters of this approach argue that it should strengthen moderates within the opposition, increase their leverage over the regime, and therefore help a negotiated settlement. The emphasis since the 7 May announcement has been on integrating the logic of arming with the logic of the peace conference. Given the difficulties that the West has had persuading rebel forces to take part in a political process, this quest for leverage is understandable, but it is ill advised.

First, it is unrealistic to expect that weapons can be guaranteed to end up in the hands of pro-Western actors. The US and its allies were unable to achieve the micro-management of weapons control in Iraq and Afghanistan, even with a massive physical presence there, so it is unlikely that they will fare better doing this with a light footprint. The apparent Western conduit, the Supreme Military Council under General Salim Idris, has a limited remit over battlefield groups.[7] This will be particularly challenging given that Jubhat al-Nusra – an organisation with declared ideological links to al-Qaeda – is now considered the strongest and most effective rebel fighting force.

Within Syria, more arms will also further entrench the political economy of war, already breeding warlordism, war profiteering, criminalisation, and intimidation as a way of life. There is a real danger that these weapons could find their way into sectarian tensions in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, supplying oxygen for the outbreak of an arc of sectarian conflict across the Levant. The other neighbouring countries – Jordan, Turkey, and Israel – are all also feeling the ripple effects in different ways. The weapons and those who carry them tend not to respect borders. Worryingly for Western politicians, there is also the danger that they could even find themselves being used against civilian targets in the West.[8]

In any event, the West is ill-equipped to win a race to arm proxies, if its support for rebels prompts Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia to increase their military backing of the regime. The procedures of Western states are more transparent, cumbersome, restricted by regulations, prone to diplomatic opposition (from allies such as Israel), or domestic political fall-out than those of countries backing Assad.

Moreover, increased foreign support to predominantly Sunni rebels feeds Assad's longstanding claim that Syria faces a foreign-backed Islamist plot, enabling him to further mobilise his domestic and international support base. Pro-opposition escalation is therefore likely to be met with escalation by the regime. Despite his military losses, Assad

4 Anna Mulrine, "A no-fly zone over Syria? Harder to do than in Libya, warns top US general", 30 April 2013, the *Christian Science Monitor*, available at http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/monitor_breakfast/2013/0430/A-no-fly-zone-over-Syria-Harder-to-do-than-in-Libya-warns-top-US-general-video.

5 See, for instance, Bassem Mroue, "Activists: Rebel groups clash in northern Syria", Associated Press, 18 May 2013, available at http://news.yahoo.com/activists-rebel-groups-clash-northern-syria-123614893.html.

6 Christopher Dickey, "A Safe Haven Inside Syria? Bad Idea", the *Daily Beast*, 1 September 2012, available at http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/09/01/a-safe-haven-inside-syria-bad-idea.html.

7 David Enders, "Syrian rebel leader Salim Idriss admits difficulty of unifying fighters," McClatchy, 7 May 2013, available at http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/05/07/190602/syrian-rebel-leader-salim-idriss.html#storylink=cpy.

8 There is also the danger posed by a stream of radicalised Europeans travelling to Syria to join armed opposition groups and fears that they could eventually bring the fight back to Europe. According to the German government, as many as 700 Europeans are already fighting the Assad regime. See Ian Traynor, "Germany fears return of European jihadists in Syria", the *Guardian*, 16 May 2013, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/16/germany-fears-european-jihadists-syria-return.

has not yet unleashed the full might of his military firepower and can still mobilise significant domestic support as demonstrated by the growing capacity of his popular militias, the *jaysh al-shabi*.[9] With all the devastation already inflicted it is worth bearing in mind that neither side has yet "done its worse". Further militarisation is likely to feed the "fight or die" narrative of existential communal fears that has become the driving DNA for much of this conflict. The sad truth is that escalations and interventions could still take the death toll from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands.

Above all, there is a real question about how far arming rebels and advancing diplomatic de-escalation really can proceed hand-in-hand. Rebels currently unwilling to engage in negotiations with the regime (distinct from accepting the regime's political surrender, which they are prepared to do) are even less likely to do so once they receive Western armed support. Some in Europe have argued that levelling the playing field will give the rebels the confidence they need to accept a negotiated settlement. However, the reality is that the opposition strategy has long been to secure Western military intervention on their behalf as the key means of dislodging Assad – sometimes referred to as "getting Western skin in the game".

Armed support from the West is therefore likely to embolden their ambitions of total victory – making them less likely to accept a power-sharing deal. It also mitigates against reaching a point of mutual exhaustion, a key potential asset in the search for a deal-making space. Given the choice, both sides will always try to convince external backers that their predicament is either sufficiently desperate or promising, so that more weapons and support remain the permanent imperative of the hour. When the lighter forms of intervention fail, as they are likely to do, they will increase the likelihood of a full-scale and prolonged intervention by the West – including a physical presence. This risks drawing the West into a much-expanded conflagration, as well as making the West responsible for reconstructing Syria for many years to come.

A strategy for de-escalation

While many analysts and diplomats acknowledge that military options are unlikely to succeed, diplomatic initiatives are often viewed as even more naive. An understandable sense of resignation pervades most discussions of Syria after the failures of the last two years. However, the 7 May Moscow announcement provides a real opportunity to shape an alternative diplomatic and political approach aimed at de-escalation. It is one that Europe should fully embrace.

The goal should be to set in motion a new dynamic in which external backers are nudging the two sides in the direction of politics rather than away from them. Given both the regime and opposition's dependence on external support, this approach is more likely to eventually soften the zero-sum ambitions of the players in Syria. And the political overlay and context in which the fighting is taking place will matter greatly.

The Moscow statement by Kerry and Lavrov signalled a return to the Geneva Communiqué of June 2012 as a framework for progress. Under the circumstances, to have a text ostensibly agreed upon by key parties is a precious commodity. But this time there should be no attempt to interpret Geneva as placing pre-conditions on talks or excluding parties from them.[10]

Insisting on Assad's removal and a full transfer of power may represent a morally appealing position for the main trans-Atlantic protagonists but it amounts to dictating terms of surrender and is antithetical to pursuing a diplomatic track with the Syrian regime or its backers. History appeared to be repeating itself when on 8 May in Rome, one day after ruling out pre-conditions in the breakthrough Moscow meetings, Kerry appeared to re-introduce them by saying that Assad could not be part of the transition, a position subsequently repeated by US President Barack Obama. Though understandable as a way to keep allies (including a suspicious Syrian opposition) on board, this is not a practical plan for building a wider international consensus. Building sufficient international consensus will also have to be predicated on taking a more inclusive approach that involves all the regional actors. Neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran was invited to the Geneva gathering in June 2012. This should be corrected this time around.

In order to succeed, a strategy for de-escalation will need three key elements: a set of guiding principles, a wide enough coalition committed to de-escalation, and a diplomatic strategy to get Geneva II off the ground.

9 "Pro-Assad militias have become the most significant source of armed reinforcement for the Syrian Army." Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency To Civil War", Institute for the Study of War, March 2013, available at http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-regime.

10 Following the initial Geneva agreement, the French and British foreign ministers quickly asserted that Assad would go as part of the agreed transitional government. See Peter Beaumont and Shiv Malik, "Syria crisis: Geneva talks sound death knell for Assad regime", the *Guardian*, 1 July 2012, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/01/syria-crisis-geneva-talks-assad.

Guiding principles

Ahead of the proposed peace conference, the US and Russia should elaborate on the Moscow understanding by translating that original Geneva Communiqué into five guiding principles for the proposed Geneva II peace conference[11]:

1. *"All parties must recommit to a sustained cessation of armed violence"* (Article 5a of the original Geneva Communiqué). This might include reconstituting the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) as and when conditions allow.[12] If it is possible to create rolling and expanding pockets in which ceasefires hold, the case for re-introducing UNSMIS should be given greater priority. It should be understood that the commitment to this principle comes first; its implementation, similar to other clauses here, will take time.

2. *"Action Group members are opposed to any further militarization of the conflict"* (Article 12b). Implementation of this clause would require that all sides agree to stem rather than increase the flow of weapons to Syria's warring parties.

3. *"The sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic must be respected"* (Article 11a). There is a huge difference between a new political effort to which all sides have agreed, a key provision of which is that the territorial integrity of Syria will remain intact, versus a continued conflict in which Syria's very existence is a point of contestation. A political process that clarifies this common goal is already important progress and a selling point for some of the regional players that will need to be brought on board for this diplomatic effort.

4. "*The establishment of a transitional governing body that can establish a neutral environment in which the transition can take place, with the transitional governing body exercising full executive powers. It could include members of the present Government and the opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent"* (Article 9a). Transition to a different order in Syria is key, though there can be no pre-conditions on what that new Syria will look like. It will have to be shaped by Syrians at the negotiating table. The central questions to be addressed will include: To whom and on what basis to transfer power? What is the role and timing of constitutional reform and elections? What type of elections should be held? What will Assad's role be, including in any presidential vote? No agreed outcome can produce a return to the status quo ante of the pre-uprising Damascus government; any political process by its nature will favour change and reform.

5. "*The Government must allow immediate and full humanitarian access by humanitarian organizations to all areas affected by the fighting"* (Article 5d). Humanitarian aid is critically needed. As soon as there is a political opening, one of the first priorities should be to support greater access for humanitarian relief. A number of European Union member states as well as Norway have already taken the lead in humanitarian aid funding, with the top five EU donors being the UK, Germany, Holland, France, and Sweden.[13]

Building a coalition for de-escalation

To be effective, the Geneva conference's sponsors will have to put together a coalition that includes all of the core regional actors. So far, none of them have been sufficiently sold on the idea of de-escalation and diplomacy – as their actions, mostly in stoking the conflict, imply. The conference's sponsors will therefore need to use the limited leverage they have to bring reluctant allies and foes sufficiently onside. Over time, both sides will have to agree to decrease and eventually stop the supply of weapons. But in order to reach such an agreement, it will be necessary for the West to engage in detail with the interests of the key relevant actors.

Russia

Russia's main interest in the conflict in Syria is the principle of non-interference in matters of state sovereignty. Moscow also emphasises the radical Islamist forces in the opposition and views with trepidation a civil war with destabilising spillover potential for Russia's own tumultuous Caucasus republics. The lesson that Russia has learned from decades of experience is that prolonged interventions rarely bring greater security and prosperity to this neighbouring region of the broader Middle East. Russia also has a secondary interest in the continued functioning of its permanent Mediterranean port at Tartus, and the well-being of the eastern Orthodox Christian community in Syria is a concern that resonates with domestic public opinion.

The condition for Moscow's support for peace in Syria will therefore be to create a process that it does not see as imposing a pro-Western or Islamist solution on the country. Pre-emptively sealing Assad's fate is therefore a non-starter for Russia, both symbolically and practically given that Russia cannot anyway force Assad out. Once a political process is set in train, Russia might also be better able to work its familiarity with the Syrian regime, including security establishment officials with whom it has strong links, to move it forward.

11 For the original Geneva communiqué see: http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/18F70DBC923963B1C1257A2D0060696B?OpenDocument.

12 UNSMIS was a United Nations peacekeeping mission set up in 2012. Its mission was suspended due to the escalating violence. See http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unsmis/ for details about the original UNSMIS mission.

13 For EU financial support, see "ECHO Factsheet", European Commission, 11 May 2013, available at http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf.

Iran

Tehran is the Syrian government's most important material backer: it provides expertise, training, weapons, and even fighters, as well as similar support from its close Lebanese ally Hezbollah. Tehran is very unlikely to be successfully squeezed out of Syria. Rather, it is likely to maintain a long-term ability to project influence in Syria if not through state structures then via what will become destabilising non-state actors. Iran's ongoing influence in Iraq and Lebanon is a clear demonstration of its ability to secure its interests against the will of the West and the Gulf – a task that it is well positioned to repeat in Syria given its deep alliances in the country. In short, Tehran matters. Iranian officials have signalled initial support for a peace conference and for a political process. They have maintained channels with some opposition leaders, including Moaz al-Khatib,[14] and with the West's allies, including recent visits by the foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, to Jordan[15] and Saudi Arabia and participation in Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's regional quartet. But if Iran is cut out of diplomacy, it will continue to be a spoiler.

The centrality of Tehran's support for Assad will therefore necessitate engagement with Iran that goes beyond the nuclear file. In fact, the failure of regional diplomacy over the Syria crisis is in part the product of intensifying tensions with Iran over its nuclear programme and the West's singular focus on the nuclear file in its dealings with Tehran. A key perceived aim of international pro-rebel policy is to dislodge Syria from the Iranian orbit, weakening Tehran's regional influence at a time when the West is also seeking substantial nuclear concessions.[16] Removal of the Syrian regime has come to be perceived as a stepping stone in a comprehensive assault on Iran, injecting existential undertones into Tehran's understanding of the crisis and that of its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah.

Much as Europeans might like to weaken Iran, they must prioritise and focus on preventing the emergence of a Somalia on the Mediterranean. Tehran's perception that the West wants to emaciate its regional influence on the way to regime change is strengthened by the West's refusal to engage on broader regional issues. Establishing a degree of common ground on Syria may alleviate some of the Iranian leadership's more existential concerns regarding Western goals and even enhance the prospect for forward movement on the nuclear file. Senior European diplomats have pointed out that the nuclear talks with Iran were most fruitful in 2003–2004 when framed to encompass other "baskets of issues".[17]

Iran's interests in Syria include defending its regional clout, as well as its access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which it fears could be challenged by a post-Assad Sunni regional order. Iran will drive a hard bargain, but not necessarily an absolutist one. Although it is in a strong position in Syria, the conflict is draining Iran of its hard and soft power and credibility in the region. It is extending support to Assad at a time when Iran's economy is suffering from punishing international sanctions. Given these challenges, it might come to accept some form of power-sharing transition in Syria that guarantees it and its allies influence. But only a political process will provide an opportunity to gain a more granular appreciation of which Iranian interests are paramount and which are negotiable.

Turkey

Although Turkey has expressed a preference for military action in Syria, Ankara will only intervene under a wider international umbrella. Turkey's position on Syria under the Assads has shifted dramatically: from hostility in the 1990s to a subsequent rapprochement, with strong commercial links and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan developing close personal relations with Bashar al-Assad himself. The current antagonism runs deeper; a flip back towards renewed relations with Assad is unlikely but would not be unprecedented.[18] Turkey is also extremely invested in the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Syrian National Council (SNC), which is ideologically close to Erdoğan's ruling AKP party and is largely based in Turkey. Turkey has hosted, convened, and shaped the opposition, including the Free Syrian Army, and has been a vital conduit for arms supplies into Syria. Turkey blames Assad for several shelling incidents into its territory, and as being behind the recent Reyhanli bombings, which killed dozens of people.

However, as the Reyhanli bombings illustrate, escalation in Syria, and the potential unravelling of the country as a result, is a double-edged sword for Turkey. Turkey is already host to an estimated 400,000 refugees, its own ethnic mosaic and homeland security are coming under increasing strain from blowback from Syria, and the deal with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – the centrepiece of Erdoğan's third term – might be threatened if Syria developments lead to greater Kurdish militancy or the use of Kurdish groups to undermine the peace or feed a wider Kurdish drive to independence.

14 "Salehi met al-Khatib on the sidelines of the Munich security conference in February 2013. Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Stephen Brown, "Syrian opposition talks with Russia and Iran", Reuters, 2 February 2013, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/02/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE9100KV20130202.

15 During that visit Salehi commented: "We have called for talks between the Syrian government and the peaceful opposition to form a transitional government." "Iran, Jordan urge Syria to sit with opposition", AFP, 7 May 2013, available at http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/05/07/Iran-Jordan-urge-Syria-to-sit-with-opposition.html.

16 See, for instance, Efraim Halevy, "Iran's Achilles' Heel", the *New York Times*, 7 February 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/opinion/to-weaken-iran-start-with-syria.html?_r=0; and James P. Rubin, "The Real Reason to Intervene in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 4 June 2012, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/06/04/the_real_reason_to_intervene_in_syria?page=0,1.

17 Author interview with senior EU official, Brussels, May 2013.

18 Erdoğan reconciled with Israel only weeks after calling Zionism a "crime against humanity". See "Israel condemns Zionism comments by Turkey's PM Erdoğan", BBC News, 1 March 2013, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21628757.

Thus Ankara is committed to Assad's departure but it is also aware of the risks of escalation. Erdoğan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu pride themselves on being the region's diplomatic avant-garde. Consequently, if there is diplomacy to be done, it is not hard to see how Ankara's leadership might be sold on the idea, especially if Turkey risks being left internationally isolated by not coming on board and if it is granted a privileged role (despite the deterioration of his relationship with Assad, Erdoğan is still one of the few potential intermediaries between the West, the Gulf, and Iran, and also remains on good terms with the Russians). Turkey also values its close relations with the US and the Obama–Erdoğan personal connection is unusually good. A concerted US push for the peace conference will therefore carry weight in Ankara, as demonstrated by Erdoğan's apparent acceptance of Geneva II during his US visit in May.

Saudi Arabia

Despite Saudi Arabia's strong military support for the rebels, it has grown somewhat edgy in reaction to the rise of jihadists and Muslim Brotherhood forces in Syria. Riyadh knows that, if Islamist groups take control in Damascus, they eventually could turn hostile to the regional order that Saudi Arabia favours. At several times over the past two years, Riyadh has reportedly slowed the pace of support, including weapons flows, to Syria, while also pivoting support towards more moderate fighters in the south of the country in a bid to stem the rise of extremists. It has also been somewhat attentive to US entreaties to block the provision of more sophisticated weapons to the rebels.[19] For Saudi Arabia, the issue is not so much the regime, as Assad and they do not want to see radicals taking over.

There are competing camps within the royal court – with Prince Bandar bin Sultan leading the hawks and Prince Mohammed bin Nayef at the head of a more cautious camp likely to be on-board with de-escalation.[20] Any Saudi backtracking on support for the opposition will be enthusiastically endorsed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which seems to have a severe case of buyer's remorse given its extreme allergy to Islamists, and is reported even to be sending feelers to elements of the Assad regime. As the dominant Gulf actor, Riyadh's support is critical – not just for the momentum that this will throw behind any diplomatic approach, but also in helping stop the considerable tide of private money that is flowing into the Syrian opposition from Kuwait as well as Saudi Arabia.

Qatar

Over the last two years, Qatar has emerged as perhaps the most independent and least risk-averse player in the region. Given the efforts it has already made towards dislodging Assad and the very strong links it has developed with the opposition, it could be the hardest to persuade to change course. However, while Doha might be the last and most vocal holdout – and a deep-pocketed one at that – were an emerging tide to get behind diplomacy and the de-escalation imperative, then even Qatar might grow uncomfortable swimming alone. So, if Doha is sufficiently out on a limb, it could prompt a willingness to move towards a less maximalist position. Moreover, if Syria's immediate neighbours can be persuaded to block arms flowing into Syria via their borders, Qatar's ability to act as a disruptive player will be tempered. Doha also has a strategic and security relationship with the US to think about.

Israel

Israel will not be party to any regional deal, but its opposition to involving Iran in a regional effort will certainly get a sympathetic hearing in Washington and beyond. However, the dangers associated with the current trajectory of the Syria conflict could force an Israeli re-think even if that falls short of endorsing multiple-issue engagement with Iran. There is already awareness in Israel that it is not in its security interests to have an ungoverned space on its northern border and a proliferation of al-Qaeda-type groups so close to home, along with the prospect of instability spilling over into its closest regional partner, Jordan (and potential new challenges in Lebanon).

Israel is concerned by increased sectarian-driven Sunni radicalism on its borders, but this is still outweighed by its desire to minimalise Iran's footprint in the region. Israel has already taken action in Syria, reportedly targeting weapons it claims were bound for Hezbollah, while implying it has no intention to be dragged in beyond the goals it has set. Still, that action has led to a heating up of the Golan border, previously Israel's quietest.

Israel will not publicly support a diplomatic process from which it is excluded and in which Iran is included. However, it might be possible to mitigate some of the pushback by building a constituency inside the Israeli security establishment for the de-escalation approach and make it easier for the US and Europe to make the case for it. Israel is also wary of more sophisticated weapons entering Syria – whoever they are intended for.

19 Robert F. Worth, "Citing US Fears, Arab Allies Limit Syrian Rebel Aid", the *New York Times*, 6 October 2012, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/world/middleeast/citing-us-fears-arab-allies-limit-aid-to-syrian-rebels.html?pagewanted=all.

20 Author conversation with European ambassador based in Riyadh, May 2013.

Other neighbours

Syria's other neighbours – Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon – are less critical players but will also clearly need to be brought into the process. Given that they control most of the routes in and out of Syria on which external backing is dependent, their consent and willingness to support a political approach could be key to ensuring its feasibility. All three countries are already witnessing severe challenges as a result of conflict in Syria, and all three would be likely to support an initiative aimed at stabilising Syria and thereby the region.

For Jordan, in addition to the significant strain imposed by refugees, there are concerns that the conflict is feeding political and militant forces that could in time directly destabilise the kingdom. Amman is fearful of the spread of militant jihadist forces, including a significant Jordanian contingent, which could eventually turn on Jordan, especially if Syria turns into an ungovernable no-man's land.[21] At the same time, the Hashemite monarchy is nervous that the increasing strength of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood might boost its own Brotherhood branch, the Islamic Action Front, which is already the country's dominant opposition party. The king has continued to express his support for a political solution even as he has allowed the Gulf to use his territory to transit weapons into Syria. Jordan's close relationship with and dependence on the West and the US in particular will help convince it.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, the conflict in Syria is fuelling ongoing sectarian divisions and helping to empower militant Sunnis who want to see Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki deposed. Maliki's Shia-dominated government fears that post-Assad Sunni rule in Syria would create greater regional challenges to its position and its remit in the Sunni province bordering Syria. May 2013 has witnessed a pronounced spike in violence within Iraq and renewed challenges to Iraq's own territorial integrity. The Iraqi government has supported an inclusive political transition that would guarantee against a full Sunni victory while allowing Iran to use its territory to transit supplies to Assad to ensure that he is not defeated militarily. Securing the active support of Baghdad should be a manageable task and a useful addition to the coalition for de-escalation – albeit one that does not include all the political and armed forces in Iraq.

In Lebanon, the two leading groups on either side of the divide, the Sunni-dominated March 14 coalition and the Hezbollah-dominated March 8 alliance, are deeply invested in their respective warring allies in Syria. At the same time, Lebanon has thus far avoided the worst fears of contagion but is coming under increasing strain. The most that can now be hoped is for the parties to fall in line with their external patrons if those patrons can be persuaded to lean behind a political track. However, given the proliferation of autonomous and increasingly radical Sunni actors in Lebanon, this would certainly not be comprehensive.

As part of this regional outreach, Europe and the other peace conference conveners might over time need to elaborate a new narrative for framing this effort, one that can resonate domestically and regionally. Such a narrative might just be starting to emerge: it identifies sectarian de-escalation, and by extension de-radicalisation and conflict spillover management, as the primary regional policy goal. This framing acknowledges that an arc of sectarian conflict, even if instrumentalised in many instances as part of a broader struggle for political power, is rapidly emerging as the greatest threat to and from the region.

A diplomatic strategy for Geneva II

In order to bring the different parties into the process, the West will need to reach out in an unprecedented fashion to Assad's backers, principally Russia and Iran, who provide Assad with critical political and military cover. So far, Western leaders have been unprepared to do this. But a political deal will only be possible if Russia and Iran have a stake in a process through which they can secure enough of their own interests. Europe will also need to press its own allies in the Gulf and Turkey to influence the opposition. That includes having a more robust strategic interests dialogue with Gulf allies than Europe is used to having – acknowledging that major commercial and defence contract ties matter, but are not the entirety of this relationship, including in its security dimensions.

To succeed in giving diplomacy a chance, the Kerry–Lavrov initiative will need very careful sequencing. The US and Russia should first secure buy-in from the other three permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the UK, France, and China). With a P5 consensus, it might be possible to agree a Security Council resolution, although the parties should avoid trying to obtain a Chapter 7 resolution.[22] If a consensual resolution is not obtainable, it should be possible to issue a presidential statement, but even if there is no shared agreement among the P5 to codify things in text at this stage, then that should not be an obstacle to pursuing the diplomatic initiative. At that point, and in advance of the proposed peace conference, the P5 should try to secure support for the approach from their respective regional allies.

Joint Special Representative for Syria Lakhdar Brahimi should take a leading role in this effort. Brahimi is one of the few figures who can reach out to all international players involved in the conflict and may be able to mediate between countries otherwise not predisposed to talking. At present

21 Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Jordan's jihadists drawn to Syria conflict", BBC News, 30 October 2012, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20127959.

22 Chapter 7 UNSC resolutions authorise actions ranging from sanctions to military force. However, Russia and China have opposed such a step on Syria, claiming that it is a precursor to Western intervention. The UNSC used a Chapter 7 resolution to intervene in Libya in 2011.

Brahimi is a joint envoy of the UN and Arab League. But, given the Arab League's active role in the conflict, it might be more effective if he were exclusively a UN envoy.[23]

Beyond Brahimi's role, the US and Europe would be expected to approach Turkey and the Gulf as well as Jordan and Israel; Russia and China would be expected to approach Iran. There would also be some overlap here – the Russians and Chinese, of course, have relationships with Turkey and the Gulf that might usefully be utilised. Both sides should speak to their respective key interlocutors in Lebanon and Iraq. Europeans should also engage with Egypt, which, under Morsi, has worked to advance a regional consensus on Syria through its quartet initiative and could be well positioned to build support for the peace conference.

In addition to the roles that France and the UK play as permanent members of the Security Council, Europeans have several other points of entry into this process. As well as France and the UK, High Representative Catherine Ashton also took part in Geneva I. Ashton has taken a notably low profile on Syria – perhaps with justification, given the paucity of diplomacy thus far. Although she has a channel to Iran through her stewardship of the E3+3 talks on its nuclear programme, she has so far been reluctant to expand her interaction with Tehran but should now do so – at least for the duration of the Syria diplomatic effort. Other EU member states with relevant contacts or leverage, including possibly Germany, might also usefully work on Iran.

Member states are due to take a collective decision on the arms embargo question at the forthcoming meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council in May. The UK and France have been looking to use the lifting of the EU arms embargo to gain leverage over Russia, Assad, and his allies, and with their friends in the Syrian opposition and the Gulf. No negotiating process can ever be fully transparent, but, as was argued above, this approach is unlikely to make securing peace more likely. The drift towards lifting the embargo should transition into a more full-throated endorsement of the new diplomatic efforts and the meeting's conclusions could usefully reflect a newfound embrace of de-escalation. In truth, however, the European arms embargo issue is something of a red herring: even if the formal Syria embargo is dropped, there are existing common EU positions regarding arms exports and conflict zones, which would still apply.[24] Along with the US and Israel, Europeans would remain reluctant to place more impactful weaponry into such an unpredictable environment.

There is also a more intimate core Friends of Syria Group, known as the London 11, which includes Germany and Italy alongside the UK and France, in a grouping that spans all the key regional backers of the opposition.[25] It met again in Amman, on 22 May, at the foreign minister level. The US plus the European four should present a united front, making the Friends of Syria Group an important forum in which to push the de-escalation initiative with regional allies and the opposition.

From local to global and back again

The protagonists within Syria would be encouraged to convene at the upcoming conference based on these principles, agreed by international parties. Europe will need to firmly press its opposition interlocutors to get behind this process, while Russia and Iran would be expected to put pressure on the Assad regime.

But, even with growing international agreement, no one expects the conflict to end soon. It is, after all, a conflict fought by Syrians; until enough Syrians want to stop fighting, there is a limit to the progress that can be made. Since the country is already awash with weapons and so deeply polarised, a political approach will clearly not have immediate results on the ground. There will be plenty of groups ready to disrupt the process. The conference will therefore need to be ongoing rather than a one-off – what retired British diplomat Sir Jeremy Greenstock has called a "conference-in-continuity".[26] This should be established in its foundational structure.

The inclusive nature of the political process should extend beyond regime representation to also include competing opposition forces. The mistake in declaring that Assad has to go was repeated in the listing of Jubhat al-Nusra as a terror group by the US. Al-Nusra fighters are not all cut from the same cloth: elements of the group belong in an inclusive political process if they are willing to join it. Experience shows that peace processes are made by involving armed groups rather than by dealing exclusively with moderates. The conference should also include internal political (unarmed) opposition groups such as the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change (NCC), as well as relevant groups representing minorities such as the Kurds. This will force the regime to confront a different dilemma and challenge to that of the battlefield: it will have to sit down with the opposition, and to present a negotiating position and negotiating team.

23 As one example, the Arab League gave Syria's seat to the opposition. See Abdullah Rebhy, "Arab League gives Syrian seat to opposition", Associated Press, 24 March 2013, available at http://news.yahoo.com/arab-league-gives-syrian-seat-opposition-134517209.html.

24 The summary and other codes and regulations regarding EU arms exports can be found at "Arms Export Control," European Union, available at http://www.eeas.europa.eu/non-proliferation-and-disarmament/arms-export-control/index_en.htm.

25 The 11-nation core Friends of Syria Group comprises the US, Britain, France, Turkey, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt.

26 Jeremy Greenstock, "For Syria, the civil war is still to come", the *Guardian*, 15 May 2013, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/may/15/syria-civil-war-new-diplomacy.

The fragmentation of the opposition presents a huge obstacle, but competing currents within the opposition will no longer be arguing among themselves in relation to purely hypothetical morning-after scenarios. The choices will be more real and the need for alliances and internal caucusing more urgent. The fact that Moaz al-Khatib's offer of talks with the regime gathered wide popular support within Syria points to growing fatigue among the population and a desire for a way out of the cycle of violence.

As external support for escalation is gradually withdrawn and substantial political pressure to move towards talks is applied, the two sides could be pushed to the negotiating table. If the backers of both sides give up on seeking total victory and embrace diplomacy, it will give the warring factions in Syria incentives to cut a deal, particularly as conflict fatigue sets in. Creating a context of a political process, supported by enough external parties and with certain agreed rules of the game, such as the key principles distilled from the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, will restore a role for politics – something that has been lacking for the last 26 months.

Fighting while talking – providing a forum and putting pressure on the sides to talk even as they continue to fight – sets in motion a different dynamic; crucially, it legitimises the idea of the political, breaking that taboo. The act of legitimating dialogue opens previously closed options and it empowers those on both sides seeking a political exit strategy, including at the local level.

It would be foolhardy not to acknowledge that, even with all of the above, the leverage that Americans or Europeans or the P5 have on the regional players, let alone the domestic protagonists, is only limited. There is no easy deal to be cut. But the extra-regional parties have simply not yet made a concerted and open-minded attempt to find a deal. And, to be clear, failed diplomacy could become more dangerous than no diplomacy at all if that leads to enhanced pressures and temptations to embrace escalation and intervention. Pursuing the diplomatic option will therefore require patience in the face of setbacks, stonewalling, and demands to declare time on talks.

The Syria crisis resembles an accordion. It has been stretched out from a local conflict to one that encompasses the neighbourhood, the region, and even global powers. Pursuing diplomacy and de-escalation requires squeezing that accordion from the outside back to its centre-point inside Syria. The initial effort has to come from the outside – Kerry and Lavrov applied a tentative first squeeze. The imperative now is to keep pushing.

If de-escalation gains a foothold, the interim result might look something like present-day Lebanon, with competing power centres and a deeply dysfunctional state. The country will remain a patchwork of regime and rebel-held territories, with weak central governance and no single monopoly on the use of force. This is not a particularly attractive outcome. Yet it remains preferable in the interim to a deepening sectarian civil war in the wake of which Syria may no longer exist. Indeed, Brahimi has spoken of the danger of "Somalisation" – that is, "the collapse of the state and the emergence of warlords, militias and fighting groups." [27]

27 "Syria could turn into a new Somalia – UN's Brahimi", BBC News, 6 November 2012, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20220183.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Mark Leonard, Jacqueline Shoen, Dick Oosting, Hans Kundnani, Jana Kobzova and Anthony Dworkin for their valuable comments and editing of the text. ECFR would also like to extend its thanks to the governments of Norway and Sweden for their ongoing support of ECFR's Middle East and North Africa programme.

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ISBN: 978-1-906538-80-4

Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 35 Old Queen Street, London, SW1H 9JA, United Kingdom

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Design by David Carroll & Co davidcarrollandco.com