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Syria: The West Should Stop Raising False Expectations – By Nikolaos van Dam

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Syria: The West Should Stop Raising False Expectations

By Nikolaos van Dam*

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In my view there are two main ways of ending the conflict in Syria:

1. Further negotiations between the regime and the predominantly secular opposition groups. (Although I am aware that negotiations with the al-Asad regime may not yield much in the end, I do believe negotiations should be attempted more seriously than they have been so far in a proper effort to prevent further bloodshed).

2. To continue the present internal war until one side can claim victory.

For the secular opposition groups to win militarily, they need to be properly armed, but the West does not provide them with enough military support to achieve this. Al-Asad’s chances of winning the war have increased and Islamic extremist forces are now overpowering the predominantly secular opposition forces. The worse the situation

becomes, the more the al-Asad regime starts to be seen as an option to be preferred over the radical Islamic state that the Islamist forces want to establish. If al-Asad does win this war, however, it will not be the end of this drama. For sooner or later there will be a reckoning against the al-Asad regime and its crimes against humanity. Therefore, negotiations are the better option, both for him and the opposition.

The Western approach to the Syrian uprising has from the very beginning been dominated by an overdose of wishful thinking, because precedence was given to supposedly democratic and moralistic ideals over realpolitik. Many Western politicians based their positions on their day-to-day domestic political reflexes, rather than on the long-term vision and result-oriented pragmatism that is needed to work towards genuinely helping to solve the conflict. Most Western politicians became fixated on the idea that the conflict could only be resolved if al-Asad was removed from power. They had clear thoughts about what they did not want, but no realistic ideas of what they wanted in al-Asad's place. Yes, they wanted a democracy, but a violent deposal of al-Asad could not realistically have been expected to result in such a desired peaceful democracy.

Al-Asad never had any intention to leave. On the contrary, he intends to overcome the revolution and win the battle for Syria, whatever the costs. And the higher the costs, the more there is a will to continue the struggle, if only to prevent all the victims from having died in vain. It appears to be all or nothing for both al-Asad's regime and the opposition movements; at least for the time being, as long as there is no war fatigue.

We should not expect any mercy in the way al-Asad's regime deals with its opponents: there will be no pardon for the massive armed revolutionary opposition groups that are trying to topple the regime. It is to kill or be killed. A compromise has, as of yet, not really come in sight because a real compromise between the opposition and the regime, with real power sharing and substantial political reforms could be the prelude to the fall of the Ba'th regime later on.

If the regime were to be toppled, its leaders can expect certain execution, and the key figures of the al-Asad regime which have been recruited from the Alawi community can expect to be in severe danger, just like the Alawi community itself, even though this community contains many opponents to the Alawi dominated Ba'th regime. It would be naive to expect President al-Asad to sign his own death warrant.

By branding the rule of President al-Asad as illegitimate, Western countries may have been morally just, but they thereby prematurely cut off any opportunity they had to play a constructive role in helping find a political solution to the crisis. What should have priority: being morally correct or helping find a solution?

Many Western countries considered it politically inappropriate to continue to directly communicate with the al-Asad regime, since they did not want to be seen as condoning its methods. They did not want to be seen as being lenient or compromising their morality in any way with al-Asad's forces, who already had the blood of hundreds of lives on their hands during the early stages of the revolution in 2011.

Three years after the beginning of the revolution, however, once it became apparent that the regime was much stronger than anticipated, and more than 125.000 dead had fallen, Western countries conceded that they needed to return to the idea of political dialogue, by helping organize the Geneva II conference in 2014. Iran was not allowed to

participate in Geneva II, although it might have played a constructive role in trying to convince the Syrian regime to change its position.

In general, as the examples of excluding the PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah or Iran from serious negotiations in other conflict situations have shown, it is a grave mistake to exclude main players in a conflict from dialogue aimed at solving it. Such exclusion achieves nothing, and only contributes to postponing a solution and allowing further bloodshed.

Imposing sanctions in the first year of the revolution with the aim of hitting the hard core of the regime, whilst simultaneously wanting to spare the population from its negative effects, turned out to be illusionary, as could have been predicted on the basis of earlier experiences with boycotts and sanctions elsewhere (e.g. in Iraq). The wishful thinkers hoped that al-Asad would step down once enough pressure had been exercised by the countries condemning him, but dictators do not follow the rules of democratic accountability and decency. Additionally, sanctions that are not accompanied by dialogue or communication generally fail to achieve their intended aim.

Most Western countries closed their embassies in Damascus, thereby further cutting off any opportunities they may have had to engage with the regime, and to maintain a good understanding of internal Syrian developments. The closing of these embassies was meant to send a message of strongest condemnation to al-Asad from the European community, but the symbolism was probably wasted on the Syrian President, who is unlikely to have lost any sleep over the withdrawal of the Western community.

I do not want to argue that if Western efforts for dialogue with the Syrian regime had been taken up much more seriously at an early stage, there would have been any guarantee of success, but it should at the very least have been attempted. At an earlier stage, when much less blood had been shed, compromise would have been much less difficult to reach than it is now.

In its seemingly unwavering conviction that the opposition would be preferable to al-Asad, it was also overlooked that the al-Asad regime is supported by a substantial part of the Syrian population, perhaps some 30 per cent or more, including part of the Arabic speaking minorities (like the Alawis, Christians and Druze). This support should not be interpreted as the existence of real sympathy for the regime, but rather as the prevalent feeling among many that an alternative regime could be even worse. Many Syrians for the time being prefer to preserve their livelihoods under the existing dictatorship rather than having their livelihoods, their shops and spare sources of income and belongings destroyed as a result of the internal war, let alone having themselves and their families be killed. Many are just as, if not more, afraid of what the opposition could bring as they are of the regime's way of ruling before.

Does the West still have options to help solve the conflict?

- Western military intervention with "boots on the ground" seems to be out of the question. There is no political appetite for it. When the Syrian regime used chemical weapons in Summer 2013, thereby crossing president Obama's so-called "red lines", neither the US nor the UK reacted militarily although it had been suggested they would. This seriously undermined Western credibility and demonstrated that their moral threats had no teeth.

- The West's declared aim to arm the opposition, thereby strengthening their chances of winning the war, seems to have been restricted mainly to non-lethal weapons. It is,

however, impossible to win a war with non-lethal weapons. When the EU arms embargo against Syria had been lifted at the insistence of the UK and France in 2013, there was - contrary to expectation - no real change as far as arms deliveries to the opposition were concerned. It turned out that there was no political will to really arm any part of the opposition, even the predominantly secular side. Questions were raised around which of the many opposition groups should be armed and with what aim, as the West obviously wanted to avoid an Islamic extremist dictatorship at all costs. But was there any guarantee that arms provided to others would not end up in their hands? What the West clearly wants to see is a moderate democratic secular pluralist successor regime, but is such a regime a serious possibility? I don't think it is a realistic prospect; at least not in the foreseeable future.

- The rationale behind delivering arms might also be to provide a counterweight to the regime, strong enough to help force a negotiated settlement. For that to happen, both sides should be convinced that this would be the best, or least bad option. The question remains, however, whether the party that thinks it can win the battle is prepared to negotiate, except perhaps for tactical reasons. Western politicians may continue to pay lip service to the secular opposition, but as long as they do not provide them with the necessary means to win the battle, their moral support has hardly any value. While clearing their political conscience by expressing support for the opposition, they are, in reality, unintentionally helping al-Asad move towards victory.

- In order to play a role in helping achieve a solution, Western contacts need to be maintained with both sides, not just with the opposition. Syrian National Coalition offices could for instance be welcomed in European capitals, as was recently done in the US. It should be clear, however, that such a move would presently be not much more than moral support. At the same time, direct contacts with the Syrian regime should be continued or reestablished.

- Various EU-leaders have on several occasions called for the imposition of no-fly zones in Syria to protect the opposition and population from air-based regime attacks, but nothing has come of this. This may partly be due to the fact that imposing a no-fly zone implies direct war with the Syrian regime.

-The setting up of humanitarian corridors to help the population gain access to food aid has turned out to be unsuccessful as well. Although the relevant Security Council resolution was passed in February 2014, this has so far been no more than a success on paper.

- Most actions by the West have been reactive, with no clearly defined plan or aim for the future beyond removing President al-Asad and his regime from power. The absence of this type of analysis is surprising, particularly given the fact that a future regime could, for example if it were to be a radical Islamist dictatorship, turn out to be worse than the current regime.

- Most Western policies have been no more than declaratory, with few tangible positive results on the ground for the opposition. Supposedly, the good intentions that were widely expressed, were generally not followed up by concrete actions, because the Western countries had their hands tied politically.

A key question that has run throughout debates around the Syrian crisis has been: do we want justice? The answer is, yes, of course, but at which cost? It is easy to say that president al-Asad should be tried for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. So he should. But does that help us in finding a solution? I

would say it does not. Let us make no illusions. The idea that Al-Asad would ever be able to leave Syria alive for such a court case, is extremely unrealistic.

Calling for justice is good in itself, as is the documenting of all the war crimes that have been committed. This has to be done, of course, but not over and above efforts to proactively work towards finding a solution and preventing the further bloodshed that will undoubtedly continue if no serious negotiations are facilitated among Syria's various clashing factions. The call for justice needs to be a part of wider efforts to create peace, focusing on Syria moving forward, rather than merely focusing on the punishment of those that are guilty for the crimes against the Syrian people committed in the recent past. A solution must be found before justice can be done. It cannot be the other way around.

The West should stop raising false expectations, as it has so often done in the past, and adopt an attitude of result-oriented pragmatism in an effort to really help solve the conflict.

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