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The Only Syrian Solution

A partition plan won't solve everything. But the Balkan example shows it can work.

By

BRET STEPHENS

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Barack Obama's efforts to reach a Syrian cease-fire deal with Vladimir Putin went nowhere again on Monday, with the president citing "gaps of trust" with his Russian counterpart. So what else is an out-of-ideas administration to do except immediately return to the same failed cease-fire negotiations—only this time with more cowbell?

To date, there have been 17 major peace initiatives for Syria in a little more than five years. These include the Annan plan of 2012; the Brahimi plan from later that year; Genevas I, II, and III; the "Vienna Process"; the "Four Committees Initiative." Every name smacks of failure. The result is close to five million refugees, some eight million internally displaced people and 400,000 dead.

Why does Mr. Obama think that a new cease-fire deal will succeed where all previous ones have failed? My guess is he doesn't, but then again a policy of diplomatic gestures is what you're left with when you give up on a policy of military leverage. The gesture toward a humanitarian cease-fire for the besieged city of Aleppo is merely of a piece with the president's other empty declarations, like his 2011 demand for Bashar Assad to go and his 2012 chemical weapons red line.

Mr. Obama will leave office in 136 days, and the new administration will need its own Syria policy. The first and most essential step: Renounce the "fundamental principle," laid down last year by Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, that "Syria should be a unified country."

The war in Syria is a complex business, significantly involving four foreign states—Russia, Iran, Turkey and the U.S.—and at least five major nonstate militias, along with the Assad regime itself. But at its

root the war is a zero-sum struggle for power. Either Mr. Assad wins absolutely or his opponents do. No government can long accept a compromised sovereignty. If Syria is to remain a unified country in principle, its warring factions will fight for as long as they are able to make it unified in fact.

The opposite of absolute victory in Syria is absolute annihilation, which is why it was foolish of the Obama administration to predict that the Assad regime, champion of a four-million-strong Alawite minority, was going to crumble the way the Gadhafi regime did in Libya. The brutality of Mr. Assad's forces is merely the reflection of what they fear will be done to them. The more brutal they are, the more brutal they must become.

How to move beyond the logic of win or die? The best option is to partition the country. The idea isn't new, and critics point out that partition plans have been known to fail, that drawing boundaries is messy, that new borders won't necessarily solve (and could aggravate) internecine rivalries, and that outside actors—Turkey above all—would have the grounds and the means to object.

All this is true, but it needs to be weighed against the likely alternative, which is some variation of the diplomatic efforts now taking place. Will advocates of the current course admit they have failed when the fatality rate rises to 500,000? Or does it have to go all the way to one million?

The point of partition isn't to solve all of Syria's problems. It's to shrink them to more manageable dimensions. A future Alawite state along Syria's Mediterranean coast might ensure the political survival of the Assad dynasty. But it could be a secure ethnic homeland, free from the brutal entanglements of the rest of Syria, especially if it has security guarantees from Russia. A Kurdish zone, joined to Iraqi Kurdistan, would be viewed as a threat by the Turks. But it could be a safe haven for civilians if defended by U.S. air power.

As for the rest of Syria, pacification would require a limited but decisive NATO intervention to rout ISIS from its strongholds, equip and aid the Free Syrian Army so that it can lift the siege of Aleppo and march on Damascus, and enjoin Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to deploy a long-term Arab stabilization force. The prospect for any of this happening is directly correlated to the perception of American seriousness—a perception that will only materialize once Mr. Obama leaves office.

It's true that for each of these points there are reservations and doubts. Can the Turks accept an extended Kurdish state? They already do with Iraqi Kurdistan, and the U.S. could mollify Ankara by insisting

the Syrian Kurds sever ties with the Kurdish PKK guerrillas in Turkey. Would the Assad regime's patrons accept a rump Alawite state? They might, if the alternative is utter defeat. Will ISIS be easy to defeat, and the rest of Syria easy to pacify? No, but ISIS and its terrorist cousins will have to be destroyed sooner or later.

In the 1990s the world was confronted by a similar spiral of horrors in the Balkans. The U.S. belatedly intervened with military force and local proxies to achieve decisive political results. What was once Yugoslavia is today seven separate countries. The foreign-policy achievement of the Clinton administration could yet be the model for its successor.

Write bstephens@wsj.com.