

Oweis, Khaled Yacoub

**Research Report**

## Sieges and ceasefires in Syria's civil war: Lessons learned as regional players undermine new approach by UN mediator

SWP Comments, No. 26/2015

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

*Suggested Citation:* Oweis, Khaled Yacoub (2015) : Sieges and ceasefires in Syria's civil war: Lessons learned as regional players undermine new approach by UN mediator, SWP Comments, No. 26/2015, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256349>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

## Sieges and Ceasefires in Syria's Civil War

Lessons Learned as Regional Players Undermine New Approach by UN Mediator

*Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

Representatives of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People, an international alliance that nominally supports the Syrian opposition, met in Berlin in March 2015 on the fourth anniversary of the Syrian revolt. Participants in the meeting discussed ways to revive the mission of UN mediator Staffan de Mistura, whose efforts for achieving a ceasefire in Aleppo – Syria's former commercial and industrial hub – have gone nowhere. Germany has been particularly supportive of de Mistura. But the main players in Syria and their regional supporters have shown little willingness to curb the violence, as the conflict, together with Yemen, is at the heart of what is increasingly perceived as a Sunni-Shia schism. Germany is committed to finding a political solution in Syria that addresses the regional dimension of the conflict. But this is unlikely to happen without a thaw between Iran and Saudi Arabia that would allow for tackling sticky political issues behind the religious rhetoric.

Mounting tensions between Arab Gulf countries and Iran have hardened the positions of the main players in Syria, thus lessening their willingness to negotiate a solution to the conflict and undermining the mission of Staffan de Mistura, the Special UN envoy. Syria has also appeared to drop from the list of US priorities, as the Obama administration has concentrated on military action against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and on reaching a deal with Iran over Tehran's nuclear program.

Seeing little chance to convene another international peace conference following the collapse of the US- and Russia-sponsored "Geneva II" talks in February 2014, de Mistura pursued a ground-up approach aimed

at establishing ceasefires and "freeze zones" in certain areas, starting in the northern city of Aleppo. The Aleppo effort was to differ from previous ceasefires, which were reached mostly with little UN involvement, in that past deals concerned areas besieged by President Bashar al-Assad's regime and resulted in de facto rebel surrender.

### Regional Tension Muddies Efforts

Aleppo's historic importance and the huge devastation it has incurred presented the city as a high-profile test case for de Mistura's approach and a potential model for other hotspots in Syria. For months, de Mistura met Assad and his lieutenants to

talk about Aleppo, as well as foreign powers that included Turkey, Iran, and Russia. De Mistura also met the Shamiya (Levant) Front, a grouping of mostly jihadist rebel brigades in Aleppo, which coordinated with the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, the most formidable anti-Assad formation in the north.

But outside powers contributed to raising the stakes on the ground and the talks achieved little. In February 2015, Assad's forces, backed by the Lebanese group Hezbollah and other Shiite militias, mounted a major offensive to seal off Aleppo – at the same time that de Mistura was in New York briefing the Security Council on his mission. In southern Syria, Hezbollah appeared to take the lead in a simultaneous offensive aimed at recapturing, on behalf of the Assad regime, strategic military positions lost to the Nusra Front as well as Arab- and Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades near the border with Jordan and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Jordan and Arab Gulf countries regarded the attacks as being a major escalation driven by Iran. In reaction – and reversing a period of apparent neglect of the rebels – the passage of weapons to anti-Assad forces through Turkey and Jordan increased, helping to repel the offensives. Progress on a nuclear deal between Washington and Tehran also added to regional worries about the Islamic Republic, with Arab Sunni monarchies regarding the deal as a catalyst for what they view as Iranian expansionism. But some in the Obama administration hope that a nuclear agreement will usher in a period of cooperation with Iran on solving Syrian as well as other regional problems.

### **Aleppo Dynamics**

Prior to de Mistura's focus on Aleppo, several ceasefires, which the regime calls "local reconciliations," were reached in besieged Sunni neighborhoods, for example in Damascus and Homs. As a result, some aid has been allowed in, but the situation has remained short of conciliatory. Pro-Assad forces were left ringing the areas,

controlling food and basic supplies, and they remained free to mount incursions. Hundreds of fighters, who laid down their arms, as well as activists and civilians who were supposed to be spared were killed, imprisoned, or disappeared, such as in the al-Qadam neighborhood of southern Damascus, and in Mouaddamiya on the western edge of the capital.

The situation differs fundamentally in Aleppo from other areas where rebel brigades agreed to ceasefires under duress, in that Aleppo has not been completely besieged by Assad's forces. The city, whose population was around three million before the revolt, has been roughly split into a western part under the control of the Assad regime and an eastern sector held by anti-Assad brigades. Eastern districts were poorer and contained most of the city's inhabitants. Their numbers swelled in the decade before the revolt due to migration from the countryside and from areas along the Euphrates River basin in eastern Syria hit by a water crisis and near famine. But only 40,000 people or so have remained in eastern Aleppo, large areas of which have been pulverized by regime "barrel bombs" and other weapons. Regime-held parts of the city have fared better and retained a much larger population because the relative lack of firepower by the rebels has meant less destruction on this side. Thousands of families from eastern neighborhoods have also found refuge from the fighting and bombardment in western Aleppo.

In February 2015, regime regulars and allied militia backed by Hezbollah tried to build on their firepower advantage and seal off the city. They mounted an offensive to take Castello Road, the only route leading in and out of Aleppo still under the control of the anti-Assad brigades in the northern sector. Pro-Assad forces first took the adjacent town of Ratyan and executed 48 people, mostly civilians. Instead of softening Aleppo's defenses, many residents in rebel-held eastern Aleppo saw the massacre as a sectarian onslaught and an Iranian attempt to capture Aleppo. This helped galvanize the

eastern neighborhoods' defenses and raised support for jihadist brigades marketing themselves as a bastion of Sunni resistance.

Islamist militancy in Aleppo had already risen after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq through the recruitment of jihadists from the city – apparently with tacit support from the Syrian security apparatus – to fight in Iraq. In 2007 a cleric known as Mahmoud Abu al-Qaqa, suspected of recruiting young jihadists in Aleppo to fight in Iraq, was assassinated in the city. The killing occurred at the same time the Assad regime began, under US pressure, to make public commitments to stop the flow of jihadists to Iraq and imprison jihadists upon their return to Syria. Yet, the authorities released most of the jihadists a few months after the revolt against Assad family rule broke out in March 2011, helping radicalize the uprising. A cycle of cooperation and crackdown involving the regime and Islamists appeared to break down for good after the beginning of the revolt. Militant Islamists, such as the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, became the most formidable adversaries of Assad, especially in Aleppo and the neighboring agricultural province of Idlib. But Aleppo's Sunni merchant class has largely remained allied with the minority Alawite regime against the rebels rooted in poorer parts of the city and in the countryside.

The jihadists have overpowered most of the FSA brigades in northern Syria. By March 2015, attacks by the Nusra Front forced the Hazm Movement – an FSA brigade that received Western backing and boasted an arsenal of anti-tank missiles – to dissolve. Four months earlier, leaders of the Syria Revolutionary Front, an FSA unit linked with Saudi Arabia, fled to Turkey after the Nusra Front overran their positions in northern Syria. The two FSA units did not help their cause by developing a reputation for graft and timidity in confrontations with the regime.

Pro-Assad forces were driven back from Ratyan in February 2015 and a major attempt to completely besiege eastern Aleppo failed. Fighting in and around the

city appeared to settle back into a prolonged war of attrition. In March 2015, the Association of the Forces of the Revolution in Aleppo, an amalgamation of civilian and military units that included the Shamiya Front, rejected de Mistura's ceasefire proposals at a meeting in the Turkish town of Kilis near the Syrian border. By that time, de Mistura was pursuing a modest deal the regime indicated it might accept. It centered on a ceasefire in one contested neighborhood rather than the whole of the city and a six-week halt in regime barrel bombings, as well as anti-Assad forces stopping the use of "hell cannons," which are improvised gas cylinder bombs fired at regime neighborhoods. But following the recapture of Ratyan, Aleppo defenders were emboldened and stepped up their efforts to encircle the Shiite towns of Zahraa and Nubul, 20 kilometers north of Aleppo. The two towns have been main recruiting grounds for regime irregulars in the north, but the towns were not sealed off during the siege. Supplies of food and other goods have continued to reach Zahraa and Nubul from Ifrin, a nearby Kurdish enclave. The regime also reached the town by air. Thus, fighting has continued in Aleppo and its rural environs. By mid-April 2015, the regime had stepped up its barrel bombings, killing more than 100 people in Aleppo over a span of five days. This occurred after rebels dug tunnels and infiltrated security compounds in the city and after a rebel mortar bomb attack killed nine people in a residential neighborhood under regime control.

### **Too Many Potential Spoilers**

The continuous possibility of Aleppo becoming encircled by Hezbollah and the Assad regime has helped maintain a semblance of unity among the rebels, although several groups left the Shamiya Front alliance after the Hezbollah assault was repelled. The Shamiya Front was eventually absorbed into Fatah Halab (the Conquest of Aleppo), a new grouping of mostly hardline Islamists formed in April 2015 with the aim

of taking the whole city from the regime, further undermining the possibility of a de-escalation of the conflict.

Outside powers are not all necessarily supportive either. De Mistura's efforts in Aleppo have weakened a long-standing Turkish call for a northern safe zone to be established to protect civilians, and to allow a provisional opposition government based in the southern Turkish city of Gaziantep to move to Syria. Without US backing, especially airpower, the Turkish proposal remains dormant. But Ankara appeared to signal its displeasure with de Mistura's focus on the north by allowing rebels brigades and opposition politicians to meet in Kilis and denounce his Aleppo efforts. Among the opposition figures in Kilis were Khaled Khoja, the head of the Western and Arab-backed National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (or: the Coalition), and Samir Nashar, a senior Coalition member from Aleppo. Both Khoja and Nashar are closely connected with Turkey. Khoja told those at the meeting that de Mistura's ideas had to be part of an overall solution. Most members of the Coalition feared that the de Mistura plan would end up handing Aleppo to Assad, but several veteran opposition figures were dismayed by the presence of Khoja at the Kilis meeting. In their view, de Mistura lacked a strategy as a mediator, but it would have been more beneficial for the Coalition not to take the blame for the perceived failure of de Mistura. In contrast, the Assad regime played for time and showed more prudence by not rejecting the Aleppo proposals outright, while having little interest in ceasefires in areas it could not control.

### **Regime Takes Blow in North**

The Coalition's mishandling of de Mistura's proposals was overshadowed in late March 2015 when Idlib city, a provincial capital, was taken from regime hands. The capture of Idlib by an alliance of mostly jihadist brigades, known as Jaish al-Fatah (the Army of Conquest), diminished the opposition's

appetite to compromise further. Jaish al-Fatah is largely comprised of the Nusra Front, as well as the hardline Suqour al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham. Its fighters stem largely from Idlib and wanted to return to their homes, but they appeared to also be driven by a perception that the war has squarely become a defense of their faith against – and a takeover of Syria by – Iran and Hezbollah. The regime accused Turkey of aiding the takeover of Idlib, ignoring apparent disarray in regime ranks after the jihadists targeted communication centers in the first stage of their assault on the city. After Idlib fell, Jaish al-Fatah captured the town of Jisr al-Shughour and advanced toward other regime positions on a major highway leading from Idlib to Alawite strongholds in the Latakia governorate. These developments have rendered de Mistura's efforts in the north ineffective. In April 2015, the UN Secretary-General asked de Mistura to start a new round of separate consultations with opposition groups, the regime, and outside powers with the aim of re-launching the political process. The consultations are supposed to be guided by the "Geneva I" communiqué of June 2012, which calls for a ceasefire and a transitional governing body, that is, the approach that regime and opposition forces were not ready to agree on in the "Geneva II" talks in early 2014.

### **Turning Toward Homs**

At the same time, failure in the north did not mean an end to de Mistura's local ceasefire approach. The UN envoy has also been trying to help conclude a ceasefire deal for the besieged al-Waer neighborhood, in the central city of Homs, Syria's third-largest city. The UN's role in another siege situation in Homs in 2014 has come under private criticism from within the organization and from Western officials for over-trusting the Assad regime.

Iran has also become a main player in Homs, which is near Shiite villages and Hezbollah strongholds in the Bekaa Valley, across the border with Lebanon. The rebel-

lion in Homs was all but crushed when Assad's forces entered the city's old quarters after two Iranian-engineered deals in May 2014. Pro-Assad forces have since tightened their hold on al-Waer, the last area in Homs where rebel fighters are present in significant numbers. The conflict in the city has been marked by waves of slaughter and carpet bombings against rebellious Sunni neighborhoods, as well as reprisal killings of Alawite civilians. After the violence intensified in 2012, most of the city's once majority Sunni population fled to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Some managed to move to the regime-held areas of Latakia, al-Nabak, on the Damascus-Homs highway, and Palmyra, deep in the desert to the east. Also, more than 14,000 families from Homs neighborhoods such as Bab Amr and the old city have found refuge in al-Waer. The district is situated near a rural Shiite region known as al-Mazraa, where Hezbollah militias have deployed and operated under the cover of the Assad regime's heavy artillery.

An Iranian official nicknamed Abu Fadi has been negotiating for months with al-Waer representatives about a deal to reestablish the regime's presence in the area in return for letting in food and medicine and allowing people to leave. A draft of a proposed agreement is vague about the status of those wanted by the regime, which has prompted opposition to the deal from some 2,000 fighters defending the district, who are mostly from al-Oqaidat, a clan rooted in al-Waer. But popular pressure on the fighters to make a deal has appeared to increase. Dozens of people were killed by regime shelling and barrel bombs in al-Waer in the first three months of 2015, including five workers at the Al-Waleed Hospital. The facility has been targeted by regime rockets several times, and only a few doctors have remained in the district. Another hospital in al-Waer is under the control of the regime, and arrests of patients are common. Four aid organizations sanctioned by the regime operate in al-Waer, but their food storage depots are empty

because deliveries have not been allowed through regime roadblocks. Bread passes through almost daily as well as occasional deliveries of perishable foods. Fuel and non-perishable foods are not allowed, and prolonged electricity cuts are common.

De Mistura and his aides have met representatives of al-Waer to see how his mission could help improve the situation. De Mistura's predecessor, Lakhdar Brahimi, a diplomatic stalwart, pushed for UN involvement in an earlier siege situation in the old city of Homs while he was presiding over the Geneva II peace talks. At the time, the UN's blessing helped seal an Iranian-brokered deal for the partial evacuation of the old city. UN officials watched in February 2014 as 1,150 people, many of whom were malnourished, left the old city over several days. They included at least 450 men between the ages of 17 and 50 years old, which the regime regarded as males of fighting age and detained them upon their exit in the nearby Al-Andalus School, although they included civilians and amputees. Four men were killed and their bodies were later found; another 150 disappeared. The remaining 300 men were freed or were forced to join the Assad army. In early 2015 information emerged about the fate of some of the 150 who went missing when an activist among them turned up alive. The activist was transferred from the makeshift detention facility in Homs to a secret police compound in Damascus and tortured. At least half of those who were initially held in the Al-Andalus School are now thought to have been killed. The rest were transferred to unofficial jails in Damascus and their fate is unknown.

Brahimi was warned from within his team that the regime was likely to violate the Homs deal and killings could follow. But he was eager for confidence-building measures amid the stalled Geneva talks and jumped on the ceasefire bandwagon. From February to May 2014, another 800 males of fighting age in the old city handed themselves in. The regime contacted them through some of the detainees who were

freed from the Al-Andalus School and offered not to harm them if they also left. Still, some 50 out of the 800 men eventually disappeared. Iran then made a push for another Homs deal, partly to show the international community it could deliver in Syria. On 8 May 2014 the last fighters exited the old city to rebel areas in the countryside north of Homs. The deal involved freeing Alawite captives held by rebels, which helped make the arrangement stick. The regime did not want to appear dismissive of its core constituency. This consideration appears to have been crucial for the relative success of one ceasefire in a Damascus district as well.

### **Damascus Neighborhoods**

Out of some 10 local ceasefires concluded since late 2013, the regime lacked overwhelming advantage in only one deal. It was concluded in January 2014 and covered the mixed Barzeh neighborhood of northern Damascus. Barzeh is ringed by Assad's forces. Yet, the close proximity of Alawite and Sunni neighborhoods in Barzeh has meant that neither side can target the other with impunity. Since the deal was made, detentions and regime incursions into Barzeh have been rare, and food and basic supplies have been allowed in without the regime making demands in return. Loyalist and rebel checkpoints have also been set up at the entrances of the district near each other. Unlike in besieged areas, where the rebel arsenals have been depleted, Barzeh fighters have retained enough firepower to make life difficult for regime supporters in neighboring areas while still wanting safety for their own families. The regime also judged that provoking the rebels could become too costly. Thus, developments such as those that have arisen in other ceasefire areas have been avoided. Following other ceasefires in Damascus, markets have been shelled. Residents have also been blackmailed to hand over wanted people or allow Syrian state television to come in to make propaganda footage in return for

letting in food. People were arrested when they went to take deliveries of basic supplies, most notably in the Yarmouk Camp in southern Damascus, theater of several failed deals and sieges of the camp by Assad's forces since May 2013.

A fallout inside Yarmouk between Islamist fighters culminated in the Islamic State's entry into the camp in early April 2015. Assad's forces intensified their indiscriminate bombardment of the area as the Islamic State fought, and largely expelled, a faction linked to the Palestinian movement Hamas from the camp. UN officials, including a deputy of de Mistura, met Syrian officials in Damascus to try and save 18,000 trapped civilians, including 3,500 children.

Yarmouk was home to 150,000 Palestinians and a large number of Syrians before the revolt. It was besieged as part of a larger siege on several interconnected rebel districts. These comprise Yarmouk, Hajar al-Aswad, which is inhabited mostly by refugees from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, as well as districts that have signed local ceasefires, including al-Qadam, Isali, Babila, Yalda, and Beit Sahm. The enormity and lengthy duration of the siege have helped radicalize the population and establish jihadist brigades as the main players on the anti-Assad side in southern Damascus. Since the beginning of the siege, starvation and malnutrition have killed an estimated 160 people in Yarmouk. Infants were among the dead as a consequence of the regime's "surrender or starve" strategy in Yarmouk. Many were newcomers who arrived to Yarmouk in poor health after Assad's forces and Hezbollah militia overran rebel areas around the Shiite shrine of al-Saida Zainab, further south of the capital. People involved in delivering aid also have come under attack from rebel bridges in the camp.

Palestinian factions in Yarmouk had split at the beginning of the revolt. The Palestine Liberation Organization favored neutrality, Hamas chose a pro-revolt approach, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) remained pro-Assad. The PFLP-GC, however, lost popu-

larity in Yarmouk after the group – apparently acting at the behest of the Assad regime – encouraged hundreds of Yarmouk residents to protest at a fence separating the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from the rest of Syria in June 2011. Israeli forces killed at least 10 protesters. PFLP-GC militiamen then killed a dozen mourners at the funeral of the protesters in Yarmouk. The balance of power in the camp began to change and the PFLP-GC was expelled. In early 2012 an armed group called Aknaf Beit al-Maqdis (Aknaf) was formed in Yarmouk by members of Hamas who stayed in Syria after the Hamas leadership left the country. The new formation joined two FSA units in fighting Assad’s forces.

In line with the wider demise of moderate rebels, jihadists displaced the FSA in Yarmouk in 2013; thereafter the Nusra Front, the hardline Ahrar al-Sham, and Aknaf became the main players inside the camp. Nearby, the Islamic State drove out other Islamist and FSA units from Hajar al-Aswad.

In a move that antagonized the Nusra Front, Aknaf became close with Sham al-Rasoul, an Islamist rebel formation based in the nearby districts of Yalda and Babila, which agreed to a ceasefire with the regime in 2014 and subsequently expelled the Nusra Front from the area. The Nusra Front therefore remained on the sidelines when, in early April 2015, the Islamic State raided the headquarters of Aknaf in Yarmouk. The attack came days after Aknaf accused the Islamic State of having assassinated Yihya al-Horani, one of its leaders, and arrested several Islamic State fighters who were at the edge of Yarmouk. Aknaf largely lost the battle with the Islamic State, and its fighters fled to regime positions ringing the camp. Others surrendered to the Nusra Front. A third group from Aknaf fled to Sham al-Rasoul’s enclaves in Yalda and Babila, along with hundreds of families who escaped stepped-up regime bombardment on Yarmouk.

Popular pressure has appeared to rise on the Nusra Front to cooperate with inter-

national efforts to spare the camp more carnage. In response, Nusra Front issued a declaration in mid-April 2015 that the group would protect aid entering the camp and deliver it to a central distribution outlet. But chances appear dim that the regime would accept aid reaching Yarmouk while the camp is under the control of a strengthened Nusra Front. After defeating Aknaf, many Islamic State fighters apparently withdrew from Yarmouk to their home district of Hajar al-Aswad, which they had left exposed while pursuing Aknaf. In Yarmouk, the regime has intensified a “bite by bite” strategy, taking areas on the edge of the camp after heavy shelling, then flattening them to make sure rebels cannot return.

Indeed, the history of Yarmouk since the beginning of the revolt underlines the lack of qualms by the regime to shell densely inhabited population centers on the one hand, and the difficulty of implementing ceasefires in areas where rebels still compete for turf on the other. In mid-2014, a ceasefire deal entitled “neutralizing Yarmouk camp” was struck with the involvement of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. But the deal did not go into effect, partly because of the lack of cooperation from the Nusra Front. A clause in the agreement stipulated the exit of fighters who are not from Yarmouk from the camp, which was seen as favoring Aknaf at the expense of the Nusra Front.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

A more assertive posture by Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the lack of a resolution for Russia’s disputes with the West, will make a new round of international consultations on Syria initiated by the UN difficult, especially as these consultations will be held at the same time international powers and Iran negotiate a final nuclear deal. Attentive to its Hezbollah proxy, Iran has played a major role in local ceasefires in Syria but it has shown little appetite for a political transition at the core of the



© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2015  
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect solely the author's views.

**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761

Geneva I framework. Such a transition could lead to a Sunni political ascendancy, potentially undermining Hezbollah's weapons supply route through Syria and weakening an important ally at the center of the Arab Middle East. Therefore, a regional agreement that would support local ceasefires with all the necessary measures needed to enforce them effectively remains unlikely. Some UN officials have argued that previous ceasefires in Syria have saved lives, but this is only true when the killings apparently committed by the regime are glossed over. Indeed, mechanisms for solving the conflict on the local level matter little without addressing the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is what underlies the region's violent conflicts which are increasingly being perceived in sectarian terms. In addition to the UN mediator, this would require a multi-tiered diplomatic effort.

First, Germany, the United States, and the other Western powers supposedly working with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries under the Friends of the Syrian People umbrella would have to agree on political priorities. The Western focus on the Islamic State has relegated the Geneva I principles for a political transition to the sidelines, raising suspicion among the Syrian opposition, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey about the West's seriousness in ending Assad's rule and four decades of Alawite domination over the country. Indeed, the US air raids against the Islamic State have indirectly supported Assad by targeting fighters who could challenge him.

A second sphere of diplomatic efforts would need to deal with the aftermath of the nuclear negotiations with Iran. US officials have indicated that they intend to approach Tehran about regional problems after a final nuclear agreement is signed. Iran has been sending money and personnel to prop up the Assad regime as the Alawite minority bleeds. Eventually, it might become too costly, and Tehran might be tempted to negotiate a transition that would preserve some of its interests and a security

structure not wholly antagonistic to Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia has also been facing problems closer to its own borders in Yemen and Iraq. It might be open to a compromise that removes Assad but preserves a semblance of the state and limits chaos by keeping a stake for those backed by Iran in the system. Thus, a crucial step would be finding a balance of interests between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Syrian opposition leaders have indicated that they recognize that Iran cannot be dismissed, and that a way would have to be found to safeguard Tehran's interest in a future Syria. The Jordanian foreign minister sent a similar message when he told Iranian officials in Tehran in March that it was time to reexamine Syria and other issues in cold political terms despite the religious taint to the conflict.

In addition, Russian backing would be needed to support a deal on the regional level. Russia wields significant influence within the Alawite core of Assad's military, and it has continued to back the regime. But Russian dissatisfaction with Assad will grow if he fails to perform. For example, Moscow seems not to have been pleased when the regime offered virtually no concessions at Syria talks held in Moscow in April 2015, which mostly involved Syrian figures handpicked by Russia who differ little from Assad. Thus, the time might be ripe to find some common ground between the West and Moscow on Syria and the regional dimensions of the conflict, although Russia has made it clear that its cooperation with the West in negotiating the nuclear deal with Iran is separate from other international conflicts. Only when there is sufficient regional and international agreement would a "Geneva III" conference stand a reasonable chance of containing the chaos in Syria.