

Russia and United States must Talk to Reach agreement on Syria



Syria is mostly destroyed as a country. There are 22 million Syrians and 4 million of them are refugees outside the country, and 7 million are displaced within the country. If you take Khobani for example, the town that the Islamic State tried to capture, after a siege of four and a half months, about 70 percent of the town is destroyed. Just enormous heaps of pulverized concrete everywhere. Or again take the town of Hasaka. 90 percent of the population has fled. It's empty, with the shops boarded up in an atmosphere of terror.

It's clear that the Russians are attacking ISIS and they're also attacking Jabhat al-Nusra, the Al-Qaeda representative. Ahrar al-Sham is not much different. They have very much the same ideology as the Islamic State. A lot of their commanders are former Islamic State, ISIS people.

The Syrian mess is getting messier by the day. This whole area now is extra ordinarily confused. You have the Russians getting involved, the Syrian army attacking and obviously the Turks don't like Russian aircraft and missiles getting close to their frontier. And the Syrian Kurds, who probably have the most--not the largest, but the most effective army in Syria, want to close the last border crossing that Islamic State

uses into Turkey. That again would upset the Turks.

It's an extraordinary situation. Somebody has compared it to three-dimensional chess, with nine players and no rules.

Syria, is being torn apart by a multi-layered civil war with many self-interested players inside and outside the country.

How could peace be returned? It's very difficult to see how this could be done without defeating the Islamic State. For the Islamic State has no plans to negotiate with anybody. It wants to kill them

If Assad goes, without doubt there would be a vacuum that would be filled, essentially, by ISIS and other extreme fundamentalist organizations.

There's a Western attitude towards Assad which is contradictory, which is first of all to treat him as the demon king who controls everything in his areas. And then treat him as someone who's going to be easily removed by the Russians. These things contradict each other. The state is largely built around the Assad family. So the idea that you could keep the state but get rid of Assad, well, in theory maybe. And Assad he has no plans to go quietly. And he represents a certain constituency in Syria.

What peaceful people would like to see would be some concentration on ending this terrible situation, the destruction of a whole country. This sort of thing just doesn't happen very often. You had it in Cambodia in the late '70s. But this complete destruction that we see in Syria, which used to have a reasonable standard of living, is an extraordinary event. And the world has really sat by and has done nothing about it.

It's clear that the Russians have eventually stepped in, in order to bring about some solution, obviously, to what's going on. Now that Russia and the US are both involved there may be more international engagement in setting up real negotiations to bring some sort of peace. Previously we had negotiations in Geneva some time back when the U.S. and Russia put pressure on their local allies to turn up. Which they did, but they basically didn't want to agree to anything. Each side at that point was hoping for military victory.

Now, maybe we have greater pressure from Moscow and Washington, there could be real talks and we might begin to have some substantive agreements.

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