

**US POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA:
IS A NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENT STILL POSSIBLE?**

Antonia Dimou, Head of Middle East Unit, Institute for Security and Defense Analyses (ISDA) based in Athens, Greece; and, Associate, Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan

The development of a “coalition of the able” to include the US, the EU, Russia and certain Arab countries to develop a comprehensive strategy to end the prolonged conflict in Syria is more relevant than ever before. The question that emerges given the outcome of the US presidential elections is related to as if a negotiated settlement in Syria is still possible.

For a meaningful answer, one should take into account that in the search of peace, the debate on Syria reflects the deepening divisions between two camps; the first camp supports opposition to the Syrian regime and the second wishes for the maintenance of the current *status quo* in fear of dire regional repercussions.

This kind of debate is actually reflected in the evolution of the US policy vis-à-vis Syria of the last three decades. The Reagan Administration defined American policy towards Syria through the prism of Cold War realism and even though the Arab country was included in the list of state-sponsors of terrorism since 1979, it was considered geopolitically important and engagement between the two countries flourished. In the post-Cold War framework, the George H. Bush Administration considered Syria a key pillar for the cementing of the regional balance of power and sought for the engagement of Damascus in the US-led alliance against Iraq in the Gulf War of 1990–1991.

Later on, the Clinton Administration considered Syria as major component of any Middle East peace negotiations and a series of presidential summits took place with the last one in Geneva in March 2000 between then American President Bill Clinton and the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. For its part, the George W. Bush Administration initially employed neoconservative tools that supported approach to Syria through isolation but geopolitical realities led to the prevalence of traditional practice; Syria’s policies in the post-September 11th era against al-Qaeda demonstrated avenues of cooperation between Washington and Damascus in the wider Middle East.

Coming to the Obama Administration, the presidency was initially marked by a pragmatist policy towards Syria encouraging high-level visits and filling the diplomatic vacuum that existed since 2005, by appointing an American ambassador in Damascus. The escalation of the conflict in Syria contributed to the differentiation of the American presidency with the imposition of a new round of sanctions against members of the Syrian regime, while simultaneously fighting ISIS, which controls large swaths of

eastern Syria and western Iraq, by leading a coalition of air strikes. The Obama administration's policy has been largely driven by estimates that instability in Syria and its spill-over effects have had to be contained in the name of *realpolitik* since there have been increasing fears that a regime change in Syria would look a lot more like Iraq in 2003 rather than Egypt in 2011.

Regarding the new-elect Trump Administration and despite ambiguity on the outlines of future American foreign policy, intentions have been crystal clear when it comes to Syria with the prioritization of the fight against ISIS considered as threat to US interests on the basis that according to American security services the current situation resembles to pre-9/11 Afghanistan. Not least important, if ISIS were not stopped, the current territory in Syria may evolve into cantons along ethnic, religious and tribal lines, as was the case of Europe after the Thirty Years War, thus causing a hasty dissolution of the Sykes-Picot borders with unpredictable consequences on immediate Syrian neighbours viewed as American strategic allies.

US participation in an enforced no-fly zone combining joint airstrikes with Russia against ISIS whose internal documents show a significant loss in funding and problems of military cohesion, is viewed as a preferred recourse taking into account that a full-blown military option is not welcome by NATO, the United States and Europe which all suffer from a palpable sense of conflict exhaustion extra reinforced by their crisis-ridden if not, stagnated economies. Besides, the introduction of advanced Russian anti-aircraft systems means that any potential "buffer or no-fly zone" areas will have to be created in conjunction with Russia or otherwise run the risk of a US-Russian military clash.

Increased concern and focus on ISIS among international and regional players can be the impetus for a political solution context especially after the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2254 on the framework for a political settlement in Syria.

The strategy for a negotiated settlement should include coordinated diplomatic efforts to implement a reconciliation process accepted by the regime and the opposition, and insure a smooth political transition.

The promotion of comprehensive reform policies to shore up national unity, the strengthening of the internal front, the firm establishment of national dialogue and commitment to grant amnesty to Syrian political prisoners can be positive steps which can send signals that the country has room for all. Special focus needs to be paid to the role of Assad in a transition. Despite the fact that the opposition supports that the Syrian president cannot be part of the transition, people who live in regime-controlled areas worry that Assad's departure could precipitate partial or complete regime collapse that would be a gift for ISIS and other jihadist

groups. Interestingly, vibrant local governance and civil society organizations as well as businesspeople still operating within Syria are beginning to enter politics as representatives of the opposition and could be the seeds of formal governance structures as outcome of political settlement negotiations.

Undoubtedly, the debate on Syria reflects not only divisions but most important, the realization that political clocks cannot be turned back; too much political mobilization has occurred for the *status quo ante* to come to the fore intact. Despite that Syria is thousands of miles away from the United States, there is an expectation from Syrians, Europeans and regional countries that Washington plays a more constructive role in ending the Syrian conflict. It is upon this expectation that the United States delivers because even though the road for the resolution of the Syrian conflict may be winding and like a river taking many curves, it is inevitable for the river sooner or later to eventually reach the ocean.