

December 12, 2015

**Seyed Hossein Mousavian**[Become a fan](#)

Head of Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council (1997-2005)

## To Solve the Syria Crisis, We Need to Overcome These Three Obstacles

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The global powers that met [two times](#) in Vienna for landmark discussions on ending the [war in Syria](#) may meet [again](#) in New York this month while several hurdles remain. In a March 2015 op-ed for the *National Interest*, I proposed a [six step plan with 10 principles](#) to resolve the Syrian conflict. During the past two years, I have sought to promote this proposal in numerous international seminars and conferences.

In late October, the International Syria Support Group [agreed](#) in Vienna on principles virtually identical to my six step proposal. In a [joint communique](#) issued after the conclusion of the talks, the participants agreed on the following:

1. Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character are fundamental.
2. State institutions will remain intact.
3. The rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religious denomination, must be protected.
4. It is imperative to accelerate all diplomatic efforts to end the war.
5. Humanitarian access will be ensured throughout the territory of Syria, and the participants will increase support for internally displaced persons, refugees, and their host countries.
6. Da'esh (Islamic State), and other terrorist groups, as designated by the U.N. Security Council, and further, as agreed by the participants, must be defeated.
7. Pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communique and U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118, the participants invited the U.N. to convene representatives of the Government of Syria and the Syrian opposition for a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections. These elections must be administered under U.N. supervision to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, free and fair, with all Syrians, including the diaspora, eligible to participate.
8. This political process will be Syrian led and Syrian owned, and the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria.
9. The participants together with the United Nations will explore modalities for, and implementation of, a nationwide ceasefire to be initiated on a date certain and in parallel with this renewed political process.

During their subsequent meeting in November, the ISSG elaborated on the specific phases of a conflict resolution plan that echoed those I laid out in my March op-ed. The differing side agreed on a Jan. 1 deadline to form a broad-based forum comprised of President Bashar al-Assad's government and opposition groups. The forum agreed to establish within six months, a "credible, inclusive and non-sectarian" transitional government that would determine the schedule for drafting a new constitution. Within 18 months, a free and fair U.N.-supervised election will also be held.

Moreover, the ISSG agreed that the violence in Syria should come to an end through a cease-fire in "parallel" to the process of political transition.

These are all remarkable achievements and represent a major step towards the resolution of the tragic war ravaging Syria today. However, there are still three major obstacles in the path of a diplomatic solution, but they should not prove to be insurmountable.

### **Obstacle 1: What to do with Assad**



*President Putin shakes hand with President Assad in Moscow. Alexei Druzhinin, RIA-Novosti, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP.*

The first expectedly has to do with President Bashar al-Assad. The United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the five major international and regional powers with influence in Syria, sharply diverge on the issue of Assad's future in Syria. The Saudi-U.S.-Turkey coalition's priority is the removal of Assad, whereas Iran and Russia's is to first eradicate from Syria the terrorist organizations that have occupied some 50 percent of the country and then to hold free elections monitored by the United Nations to decide the country's president and constitution. For its part, Iran has maintained for years that it is the Syrian people who should decide on who their president should be, not other countries.

After the ISSG Vienna meeting, President Barack Obama declared: "Russia and Iran must decide whether they want to prop up Syrian President Bashar Assad or save the Syrian state." However, the experience of Libya these past few years shows that Obama is wrong. NATO and its Arab allies attacked Libya, overthrew Qaddafi, and have since then sat totally helpless as the country has descended into chaos and come to the verge of being a failed state.

It has already been agreed in Vienna that "Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character are fundamental" and that its "state institutions will remain intact." It is difficult to imagine how the collapse of Assad would not portend the total collapse of the security-military establishment of Syria. And without the current Syrian military and security forces -- which are the most consequential force on the ground fighting terrorist groups like the self-proclaimed Islamic State, Al Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra -- it would be impossible to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria. Indeed, in the fight against terrorism in Syria, the insurgents supported by the West and its Arab allies like the Free Syrian Army have been almost completely ineffective.

Therefore, the critical priority should be to clear Syria of terrorist groups, reestablish the country's territorial integrity, create the conditions for the return of displaced persons and refugees, and then leave it to Syrian people to choose their leadership through transparent, free and fair elections within the framework of a new constitution that enshrines protections for all minorities.

### **Obstacle 2: How to effectively fight terror groups in Syria**



ASSOCIATED PRESS

*The Paris massacre and threat of further ISIS attacks abroad underscore the importance of this cooperation. AP Photo/Militant Website, File.*

The second key obstacle to a sustainable peace in Syria has to do with how to effectively fight and destroy terrorist groups in the country like ISIS. The fact is that airstrikes are only effective when conducted in support of a well-organized military partner on the ground. In Syria, the largest and most effective ground force fighting ISIS and other terrorist groups is the Syrian military, which is supported by Russia and Iran. Regional U.S. allies, on the other hand, have been supporting many of the terrorist groups fighting the Syrian army.

The United States and its allies need to understand that it is impossible to fight ISIS and the Assad government simultaneously. To form the necessary coalition of air and ground forces to destroy ISIS, cooperation between NATO, the Syrian army, Russia and Iran is vital. The Paris massacre and threat of further ISIS terrorist attacks abroad makes such cooperation even more necessary and politically viable.

### **Obstacle 3: Extremist movements' ties to West's allies**



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*Extremist Sunni movements draw their ideology and the vast majority of their weaponry and financial support from the closest allies of the West in the region. AP Photo/Hasan Jamali.*

The third dilemma is the reality that extremist Sunni movements such as Al Qaeda, ISIS and the like draw their ideology as well as the vast majority of their weaponry and financial support from the closest allies of the West in the region. It is time to realize that because ISIS is first and foremost an ideology and culture, not merely a militia, the world will never be able to defeat it as long as Western allies are actively promoting its ideology.

As former U.S. Ambassador Curtin Winsor, who was special emissary to the Middle East at the beginning of the Reagan administration, wrote in 2007:

The Saudis have spent at least \$87 billion propagating Wahhabism abroad during the past two decades ... The bulk of this funding goes to the construction and operating expenses of mosques, madrassas, and other religious institutions that preach Wahhabism. It also supports the training of imams; domination of mass media and publishing outlets; distribution of Wahhabi textbooks and other literature; and endowments to universities. By comparison, the Communist Party of the USSR and its Comintern spent just over \$7 billion propagating its ideology worldwide between 1921 and 1991.

The first day that Russia launched military strikes against terrorist groups in Syria, a prominent citizen of a U.S. ally in the region told me at a conference in Berlin, "we will make Russia bleed." The blowing up of a Russian passenger plane claimed by ISIS and a Russian military jet by Turkey are steps in that direction.

What the major Western powers need to keep in mind is that their efforts in the past few decades to transform certain countries through military and political intervention have failed. In Syria, this approach has led to a "secular" political order coming to the edge of being overthrown in favor of a Salafi-Wahhabi Islamic state taking control of the country. Until this approach is abandoned in favor of pragmatism, the war on terror will not end and terrorist attacks in the West and elsewhere will continue.

*Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a research scholar at Princeton University and former deputy of Iran's national security foreign policy. His latest book, "Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace" was released in May 2014.*

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Majd el-Ahmad/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images



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## Conversations

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**Wong Tho Kong** · Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The Syrian Army have been successful on the ground recapturing many territories. In the captured villages in the Northern part of Lattakia they have found some <http://en.farouq.com/bov/text.asp?app=12040016001170>

Like · Reply ·  2 · Dec 7, 2015 9:37pm



**Will Leong** · California State University, Sacramento

It's all too predictable for an Iranian government official to emphasize the rights of minorities in Syria where the government is from a minority group that's friendly to Iran. Iran's definition of terrorism does not include, of course, Israeli civilians being bombarded with rockets by it's ally Hezbollah.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Dec 8, 2015 8:14pm



**Yvonne Pennink** · Gemeentelijk Lyceum v. Meisjes, HBS-B

Now, that is true. But the article is very logical and sticks to the main points. Israel, and the role of Iran together with Hezbollah and Hamas is a separate issue. And many of the rockets coming from Gaza have been identified also as Iranian made.

I have some practical issues, such as, with the Assad regime still in place, how would a fair election be possible and what would be the logistics of all Syrian, including refugees having a vote in those elections.

I enjoyed the article. Good one.

Like · Reply · Dec 10, 2015 3:41pm



**Neil Scott** · Works at Self-Employed

"The Saudi-U.S.-Turkey coalition's priority is the removal of Assad"?

I didn't realise that the The Saudi-U.S.-Turkey coalition had a vote in the Syrian election.

Maybe that position has been the real problem in Syria all along. . .

Like · Reply ·  3 · Dec 8, 2015 2:02am



**Diego Ectre** · Co-founder at Foundation for Education and Charitable Works

What Syrian election?  
Assad inherited power from his dad, who stole it in a military coup.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Dec 9, 2015 6:01am



**Yvonne Pennink** · Gemeentelijk Lyceum v. Meisjes, HBS-B

The removal of Assad is indeed an US priority, especially a priority of Obama, and, no, it has absolutely NOTHING to do with voting in Syria.

Like · Reply · Dec 10, 2015 3:43pm



**Neil Scott** · Works at Self-Employed

Diego Ectre The fact that you don't know about the Syrian election on 3 June 2014 speaks volumes. . .

Maybe you should become acquainted with the truth.

Like · Reply · Dec 11, 2015 4:11am

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**Haim Cohen**

4. Iran and Hezbollah - the Shia terrorists. Why His Excellency doesn't say a word about that? Could it be because he belongs to them?

Like · Reply ·  2 · Dec 7, 2015 8:08pm



**Ardavan Ali Algooneh** · Physician at Amiri Hospital

lol do u mean the people who are actually fighting terrorism on the ground? you are living in a fantasy world

Like · Reply ·  2 · Dec 7, 2015 9:04pm



**Sheila Khani**

Labeling a country as a terrorist and spreading hate is much like other racist parties have done in the past to eradicate certain people of certain nationals. Hezbollah is a political party born in Southern

Lebanon fighting Israeli invasion- if there were no invasion there would've been no Hezbollah but Israel always gets a pass, right? Hezbollah's threat is not international but for Israel's interest only.

Like · Reply ·  2 · Dec 8, 2015 1:49am



**Neil Scott** · Works at Self-Employed

Maybe most of the world doesn't see them as terrorists. . .

And many in the world may see the US as the prime mover of destroying countries and as being the terrorists. . .

Like · Reply ·  1 · Dec 8, 2015 2:04am

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**Sheila Khani**

very well said especially #3 where Saudi's role in funding extremism has gone deliberately unnoticed by the US gov't for decades. REAL SHAME! That includes Saudi's role in funding Madrasas in Pakistan and now funding ISIS and other Wahabi sects in Yemen.

Like · Reply ·  2 · Dec 8, 2015 1:44am



**Mansour Ansari** · Syracuse University

Seems quite reasonable to me. The writer knows what the facts are in this conflict.

Like · Reply ·  1 · Dec 7, 2015 9:16pm



**Sun Hu**

The Head of the Snake are the Saudis, until the head is chopped, the middle east mess would continue and the Spineless Western politicians would continue to put their citizens at harm

Like · Reply · Dec 9, 2015 2:55pm · Edited



**Hamada Ipvempls** · CUNY (The City University of New York)

It is rare to read a make sense article in this news

Just add up that the European and American have to realize that the Muslim brotherhood who took from Europe and the USA home are origin and makers of terror

Like · Reply ·  1 · Dec 8, 2015 3:25am



**Алексей Сергеев** · MMA им. И.М.Сеченова

1st obstacle is Turkey, next two are Saudi Arabia and US. The world must remove these indeed.

Like · Reply · Dec 10, 2015 7:43am



**Peter Tan** · NJIT

Instead of helping Syrian people change their leaders democratically, USA/Saudi/Turkey still want to topple Assad via pressure or military force (Ukraine, Libya, Iraq, etc..).

Like · Reply · Dec 8, 2015 11:16am



**Diego Ectre** · Co-founder at Foundation for Education and Charitable Works

You're aware that the Syrian civil war started when Assad used the army against peaceful demonstrators? And that there's never been a free election in Syria?

Like · Reply ·  1 · Dec 9, 2015 6:08am



**Yvonne Pennink** · Gemeentelijk Lyceum v. Meisjes, HBS-B

Diego Ectre You are correct, and the article points out that there are two opinions, one is to eliminate Assad first (US a.o.) and the other is to first get rid of ISIS. ISIS, moreover morphed out of the Syrian "freedom fighters", those who were first demonstrating and then got involved into action with Assad and his troops.

Like · Reply · Dec 10, 2015 3:52pm

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