

A Balkan map for the road to Damascus?

by Ian Bond



It is two years since the EU imposed an arms embargo and other sanctions on Syria “to achieve a change of policy by the Syrian leadership without further delay”. Since then, over 80,000 people have been killed, over a million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries and over four million are internally displaced. And in that time, the EU has issued well over 100 statements and applied 21 further sets of sanctions, without any visible impact. If the highest wisdom of a state is masterly inactivity, this is the opposite: impotent hyperactivity.

Indeed, everyone’s policy towards Syria has failed: the West has not succeeded in replacing the Assad regime with a liberal, secular democracy; Russian and Iranian support has not enabled Assad to reassert control; Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States have not managed to propel the Sunni majority into power at the expense of the Alawite minority. International leaders know that they need to do something different: that is the message of recent American and British attempts to re-launch a peace process in partnership with Russia. But there is not even the outline of an international consensus on what to do.

This crisis is on Europe’s doorstep. The nearest EU member-state, Cyprus, is 100 miles from the Syrian coast. Europe should devise a more effective set of policies and sell them energetically to the key players inside and outside Syria. Clearly, Syria is not Bosnia in 1994. But there are general lessons to draw from the Balkans.

The first is that a framework has to be found for reconciling the interests of the parties’ international patrons. In former Yugoslavia, the establishment of the contact group of major Western powers and Russia was a necessary though not sufficient condition for progress. Despite Moscow’s initial wariness, over time a degree of confidence was established, so that the Russians applied pressure in Belgrade. Together with the changing military situation on the ground, this cleared the way for the Dayton peace process.

In the Syrian context, putting together a small and effective contact group would be challenging: some US officials say that it could be “politically impossible” to involve Iran in peace talks. But excluding Iran a priori would only encourage it to play a spoiling role. A contact group would also offer opportunities: for example, obliging the EU and Turkey to unite around common objectives

and actions, which they have so far failed to do despite their obviously shared interests in the stability of the region.

The second lesson from the Balkans is that all parties have to know that while they cannot win an outright victory, they will not face annihilation. Debate raged within and between Western countries from 1992 onwards over whether to support the forces of the Bosnian government with arms, at a time when they were taking a beating. It was Douglas Hurd, then British Foreign Secretary, who notoriously warned that lifting the arms embargo would only create a “level killing field”.

The Americans nonetheless covertly supplied weapons and training to the Bosniaks and Croats and ultimately lifted the arms embargo unilaterally in November 1994. That on its own did not end the fighting; indeed, it took the Srebrenica massacre in August 1995, and NATO airstrikes, UN artillery bombardments and the defeat of Serb forces in Croatia to bring about a ceasefire and ultimately the Dayton agreement. International military action proved to the Serbs that they could not win, but also showed the Bosniaks that their success depended on international support – which could be withdrawn.

The same arguments are playing out in Syria. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said after an EU foreign ministers’ meeting in March: “I don’t think the bloodshed in Syria will decrease, should we engage in an arms race.” But the bloodshed is not decreasing anyway. There is a strong case for training and equipping forces loyal to the Syrian National Coalition – which, after all, the EU accepts as “legitimate representatives of the aspirations of the Syrian people” – to shake the confidence of the regime. But there must also be a credible threat from leading NATO and Middle Eastern powers that they will launch military strikes against Assad’s air and ground forces. Given that Russia and China are unlikely to support military action (even tacitly, as in Bosnia and more recently Libya), there would have to be a coalition willing to act without UN Security Council authorisation, for example by seeking UN General Assembly blessing through the “Uniting for Peace” procedure (designed by the US in 1950 to circumvent Soviet vetoes in the Security Council).

The third lesson is that immediate regime change should not be a precondition for starting negotiations – a hard thing for the victims of atrocities to accept. The Dayton process did not unseat Slobodan Milosevic or indict him

for war crimes. Of course, Milosevic did not rule post-war Bosnia, but there are examples – the Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe, for instance – of an opposition movement reluctantly accommodating the brutal leaders of the ancien regime, in the interest of ending violence. The Syrian National Coalition should hear from its foreign supporters that it will not achieve a knock-out military victory and that it should focus on getting what it can at the negotiating table, which may or may not include Assad’s departure. The key objectives should be an end to violence and a political construct guaranteeing the rights of all communities in Syria. Without that, conflict will start again.

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The fourth lesson is that the rest of the world cannot walk away after a political settlement. The Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia had 54,000 troops, including Russians. Together with its successor, SFOR, it played a vital early role in creating confidence and ensuring that the terms of the peace agreements were respected.

Inevitably, any suggestion of ‘boots on the ground’ in Syria will raise the spectres of Afghanistan and Iraq. But Bosnia was different: there was a prior political settlement from which all the parties had gained something; and the involvement of Russian forces gave the Serb side some sense that IFOR was not a hostile army of occupation. Whether the Russians would join such an effort in Syria is a moot point; Putin’s world-view is very different from Yeltsin’s. But a purely Western force would have much less chance of being seen as a disinterested guarantor of peace.

Even if these lessons are applicable to Syria, none will be easy to implement. They involve uncomfortable compromises, risky political choices and negotiating with partners who should be in prison. Plenty of experienced diplomats who know the region well think that nothing can be done to halt the catastrophe. We cannot make Syria an earthly paradise. But we have to try in every possible way to stop it becoming still more of a hell on earth, lest Europe be singed by the flames.

Ian Bond
Director of foreign policy, CER