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Optimism on Syria is misplaced. Here's why

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One of the common sentences repeatedly said by Syrians from the two main warring sides is that the solution to the conflict is attainable when the “big guys” decide to end it. Those big guys – at the UN Security Council – passed a unanimous decision on Friday calling for peace negotiations and a ceasefire to steer the country towards a political settlement.

“This council is sending a clear message to all concerned that the time is now to stop the killing in Syria and lay the groundwork for a government that the long-suffering people of that battered land can support,” the US secretary of state, John Kerry, proclaimed after the successful vote.

Both inside and outside Syria, the resolution has raised hopes that this may indeed mark the start of a serious process to find a solution. And much can be achieved, at least in preventing the conflict from spiralling further out of control.

But the optimism seems to be misplaced, mostly because it is not based on any progress or attainable objectives in the foreseeable future. Instead of the usual focus on the difficulty of rallying the opposition around one vision to end the conflict, one aspect related to the regime can help illuminate the intractability of the process: the fate of Bashar Al Assad.

Throughout the conflict, western and regional powers have sought to persuade Iran and Russia to abandon Mr Al Assad to reach a political settlement. If Tehran agreed to drop Iraq's strongman, Nouri Al Maliki, why not do the same with the Syrian dictator? Russia and Iran, according to this logic, would maintain their interests through a regime figure that even the Gulf states had indicated they would support, including Alawite generals such as retired Ali Habib and – until he was killed – Assef Shawkat.

But the fate of the president is not only about whether Tehran or Moscow think it is something they can agree on. Mr Al Assad symbolises continuity of the old order. His survival ensures the regime's psychological and moral authority over its supporters, and even over many of its detractors. That is what many in the regime camp think of when they speak of “state institutions”, since the survival of the regime means any future government can roll back the old governing structure even if it has collapsed in most of the country.

Even if another Alawite loyalist replaces Mr Al Assad, many close to regime circles doubt the new president would be obeyed by everyone. Already the regime has fragmented in many parts of the country into roving fighting factions led by a field commander, not so dissimilar to the rebel forces. Despite this reality, orders from the people's palace continue to be followed in regime-held areas even if provisional militias enjoy massive leeway. Similarly, some in areas controlled by groups such as ISIL avoid joining or publicly showing support to armed factions in fear of the “return” of the regime.

Any fault-lines, warlordism and fracture within the regime could be contained by it as long as Mr Al Assad is in power.

For many regime supporters, “putting things back together” is preferable and more familiar than meeting the opposition in the middle to embark on a new path together. They argue that the survival of the president is the surest way to avoid a darker future, even if regime supporters endure more losses. Others say such a concession will set the tone for the opposite camp to continuously seek change, which will eventually reverse regime dominance.

Likewise, the survival of Mr Al Assad at the helm of power in Damascus is a no-brainer for many within the opposition. Rebel forces who accept a compromise that keeps him in power risk the loss of support from their constituencies. Agreeing to a ceasefire should not be confused with accepting a political settlement led by Mr Al Assad. The idea that the political opposition, much less the armed one, will go to Damascus to participate in government while he remains in power is political if not physical suicide.

The same goes for supporters of the regime. Mr Al Assad's staying in power is the way Iran and Russia maintain the government's support base, notwithstanding other misgivings. His removal would add practical burden to their task in Syria. The consequences of his removal are unpredictable and the price for abandoning him cannot be guaranteed.

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