

RUSSIA'S DEAD-END DIPLOMACY IN SYRIA

OVERWATCH PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



Maseh Zarif and Jennifer Cafarella

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On this episode, ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella discusses her new report “Russia’s Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria in a Q&A exchange with Maseh Zarif. Jennifer describes Russia’s attempt to exploit the current diplomatic process in Syria to enhance its own credibility and influence in the region and beyond. She outlines what the United States should do to defend its interests and deal with the primary obstacle to peace in Syria – Bashar al-Assad and his regime.

Maseh Zarif:

This is Overwatch. A podcast brought to you by the Institute For The Study Of War. My name is Maseh Zarif and I’m your host for this episode. On this episode, ISW research director, Jennifer Cafarella, discusses her new report on Russia’s role in the war in Syria and the prospects for an acceptable resolution to the conflict.

Jennifer, we’re now approaching the nine year mark since the initial uprising in Syria. What began back in 2011 as protest calling for reform, morphed into a complex conflict after the Assad regime and its backers responded with violence. As we sit here in 2019, what would it take to forge a negotiated resolution to the war?

Jennifer Cafarella:

A diplomatic settlement of the war in Syria as of 2019 requires two fundamental things. First, a political compromise between the regime of Syrian president, Bashar Al Assad, and his opposition. The revolution against Assad began in 2011 in opposition to his brutality and with a demand for basic human rights and justice within Syria. Bringing his opposition back into the fold would require substantial changes to the structure and character of this regime, which had been ruling in an incredibly repressive form, while failing to deliver the basics of governance that the Syrian population expects. That political compromise remains very distant as of 2019 because the Assad regime responded in 2011 with violence rather than with concessions to the opposition and has consistently chosen to continue a war rather than consider meaningful changes to the structure and character of the regime.

Second, a diplomatic settlement of the war in Syria at this stage would require a wider international agreement to reconcile the competing interests of the external states that are fighting within Syria and have deployed military forces to work with Syrian proxies on the ground. This includes Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the United States. Both an intro Syrian compromise and the wider international settlement would be necessary. Neither agreement alone would be enough. An intro Syrian compromise will not be sufficient to deliver on the wider interests that Russia and Iran are pursuing within Syria. The inverse is also true. Those actors have Syrian proxies, but do not have sufficient leverage to compel those Syrian proxies to accept a diplomatic resolution that does not address the core underlying grievances that initiated the civil war in 2011.

Maseh Zarif:

Let’s delve a bit into the first part of your answer, which is really about intro Syrian dialogue and reconciliation. Is the type of settlement that you described there possible right now?

Jennifer Cafarella:

An intro Syrian settlement is inescapable if this war is going to end. The Assad regime does not have enough military strength, even with support from Russia and Iran to win the war militarily. Therefore, a compromise will be necessary. However, that compromise has grown increasingly difficult since 2011. The way that the Assad regime

has responded to the uprising has radicalized it and made conditions even more difficult to reach to compromise. Assad flatly refuses to grant any meaningful political concessions to his opposition. Even basic concessions such as the release of political prisoners whom his security forces arrested early in the revolution for having the audacity to protest peacefully against his regime. Assad has also refused and actively spoils any and all meaningful cessation of hostilities or ceasefires meant to build momentum towards the potential for negotiations between the regime and his opposition. Assad refuses even to send official delegates often to international negotiations based in Geneva and consistently states in public comments that he regards no legitimacy of international diplomacy and will accept no settlement of the war, short of the full reconquest and subjugation of all of Syria.

The additional challenge is that the opposition to Assad has never been united and increasingly fractured and radicalizing under the continued military pressure from the regime and its backers, as well as increasingly disillusioned by the failure of the international community to take meaningful action to compel Assad to negotiate and thereby create a legitimate chance for a political compromise. Opposition groups have continued to send delegates to various international attempts to broker a diplomatic settlement, but are increasingly losing credibility on the ground with opposition communities that are continuing to suffer from the brutality of the Assad regime and the war crimes committed by Russia on Assad's behalf. As a result, the gap is widening between the international arena of diplomacy and the reality on the ground, where the Assad regime cannot win the war outright, but is increasingly winning the competition to determine whether and under what conditions a political compromise can be reached.

These conditions create a significant opportunity for jihadist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS who oppose any negotiated settlement of the war and have been arguing since early in the conflict that Syrians face only one of two choices, either the complete subjugation to the Assad regime or an international jihad, not to reach a negotiated settlement of the war, but rather to completely overthrow and destroy the regime and replace it with a hard line Islamic state. As of 2019 the argument that there can be no compromise with Assad appears increasingly legitimate given that the past eight years of war and attempts at diplomacy have led only to the further massacre of the Syrian opposition. As jihadist groups continued to gain credibility, as well as military strength on the ground, a political compromise will be increasingly difficult to reach because it will be increasingly difficult to sell without a meaningful international framework and will to uphold the agreement on the ground within Syria.

Maseh Zarif:

Let's shift now to some of the non Syrian actors, including the United States and its allies and partners, and then the pro Assad camp as well. Are there any overlapping interests that could lead to some credible understanding among all these different actors?

Jennifer Cafarella:

Hopefully in the long run, an international agreement that contributes to an end to the war in Syria will be possible. However, it remains very difficult in the near term. The gap between the interests and goals of the various external states in Syria remains significant. The US is perhaps the actor most committed to reaching an enduring and just settlement of the war in Syria, but has been the least willing to take action on the ground to set the conditions to shape that diplomatic effort. The US also pursues wider regional goals inside of Syria to include the full withdrawal of all Iranian forces, which are propping up the Assad regime and the enduring defeat of the Islamic state, which requires the creation of a viable political alternative to the Islamic state in areas that remain opposed to Assad and unlikely to reconcile meaningfully with his regime.

Turkey is a NATO ally and therefore in theory aligned with the United States, however, is at war with America's local partnered force in Eastern Syria the Syrian democratic forces. Turkey's interests thus include dismantling, if

not destroying both America's military partner in Syria and the governance structure that that military partner has put in place in areas liberated from ISIS. The reason Turkey pursues this objective is because America's partnered force includes a Kurdish element that is linked to a decades long Kurdish insurgency against the Turkish state and therefore Turkey regards the American project in Eastern Syria as a grave national security threat. However, Turkey is also broadly aligned with the United States in the desire to compel the Assad regime to grant concessions to his opposition. Turkey is the largest backer of the Syrian armed and political opposition and continues to strengthen some of those opposition groups on the ground, which are partnered with Turkish military forces to fight against the American partner in Eastern Syria. Turkey is also governing through an exiled Syrian political opposition body, the Syrian interim government, which seeks to provide an alternative to the Assad regime.

Therefore, there is some potential for alignment between the US and Turkey in terms of a Syrian diplomatic process. However, the gap caused by America's partnered Kurdish force in the East has precluded a greater unity of effort between the US and Turkey in applying political pressure on the Assad regime. Instead, Turkey has turned to an alignment with Russia whose interests are primarily to secure an air and Naval base on the Syrian coast, which Russia can use to project force in the middle East and beyond. Russia also seeks to use its involvement in Syria to posture internationally, to gain diplomatic credibility as a mediator, if not peace broker, which Russia intends to use to manipulate other conflicts such as the conflict in Ukraine. Russia has prioritized reaching out to Turkey to co-opt Turkey away from NATO and into Russia's orbit, thereby neutralizing in some respects, the effect of Turkey's policies to apply pressure on the Assad regime.

Iran is perhaps the most committed to the survival of the Assad regime and the most deeply involved in the regimes day to day operations. Iran regards the survival of the Assad regime as an existential requirement for the Iranian ideological goal to export the Islamic revolution throughout the region, to create a network of pliant and ideologically aligned states from Lebanon to Syria to Iraq that can enable Iran to become a regional hedgeamman at the expense of Saudi Arabia and in a manner that enables Iran to apply greater military pressure on the state of Israel. Iran has invested heavily in the survival of the Assad regime militarily since the start of the revolution and does not desire a diplomatic settlement of the war. Iran is content for Syria to remain a war zone, as is Russia, although Russia in some regards, has a more limited ability to commit resources both military and economic to Syria and does not regard Syria as an existential requirement in the same way that Iran does.

Finally, the other external state relevant to the situation in Syria and that has to be accommodated in some way in a future political settlement, is the state of Israel, which is conducting its own military campaign against Iran in Syria. Now, a political deal in Syria does not necessarily need to include Israel. However, if it does not address Israel security concerns regarding the buildup of Iranian forces and Iranian proxy forces, then Israel will likely continue to take military action in Syria, which was undermining, if not nullifying a negotiated settlement of the war. Assad is aligned with Iran in opposition to Israel in part due to Israel's occupation and annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights. Thus, in some ways the Iranian and Israeli conflict is intertwined with the fate of Assad, Syria.

Maseh Zarif:

Walk us through UN security council resolution 2254 and its relevance to the diplomatic process right now.

Jennifer Cafarella:

So the current diplomatic process in Syria is an outgrowth of a UN security resolution that Russia and the United States jointly passed in 2015, UN security council resolution 2254. 2254 is thus an important compromise between Russia and the United States over the framework for a diplomatic process, but it actually reflects a significant departure from the original framework established by the UN in 2011. 2254 calls for three primary steps. First, a ceasefire, second, a revision to the Syrian constitution and third, a free, fair and UN monitored election within Syria. The process to implement 2254 has been stalled since 2015 essentially since the resolution was

passed, in part because of how Russia has manipulated the process, but also because Assad also continues to refuse to accept the process as a legitimate means to negotiate an end to the war. The US has nonetheless continued to prioritize working with the UN to implement 2254 as a roadmap towards peace in Syria.

Maseh Zarif:

Under current US policy, there's an emphasis on this track being the vehicle for a political resolution in Syria. Do you see a basis for optimism that it can in fact produce a credible outcome?

Jennifer Cafarella:

So I mentioned that 2254 is a departure from the original Geneva framework established in 2011, that's important because the framework that 2254 offers is actually in some ways a major concession to Russia and through it, the Assad regime. The opposition's original demands included the departure of Assad from power and the establishment of a transitional government after a set of concessions from the Assad regime, including the release of political prisoners and an enduring ceasefire. 2254 also calls for a ceasefire which has not occurred and yet the US and UN are continuing to move forward with the second step in the 2254 process, the constitutional committee. Even that ostensible step forward has been a concession to the Assad regime. The UN granted Assad the right to approve two thirds of the composition of the constitutional committee, which is comprised of three separate lists, 50 pro regime delegates, 50 civil society delegates, both approved by the Assad regime and a third list of opposition delegates approved by Turkey.

We've analyzed the composition of all three lists and have concluded that Assad has enough influence within the constitutional committee essentially to have veto power over its deliberations. He thus allowed the committee to form in what both the US and UN championed as a major step forward in September, 2019, but he did so only after gaining enough leverage so that he can kill this process at will. More dangerously, Assad may attempt to use this process to reach a superficial revision to the Syrian constitution that grants no meaningful changes to the structure or nature of this regime, but that may gain international recognition as if it is a significant accomplishment for diplomacy in Syria. That outcome would be very dangerous because it would lend international legitimacy to the brutality of Assad's regime and it would further empower jihadist groups that have argued that no compromise with Assad is possible and that the international community cannot be trusted to act in a way that actually protects Syrian civilians from the repression of the Syrian state.

The notion of a free and fair election, which is the third step called for in 2254 is also particularly unrealistic. Syria remains a war zone, it would be incredibly difficult to hold any election in Syria under such military conditions. Assad also flatly refuses to accept UN monitors of any form. He is planning to hold his own presidential election in 2021 which will be a sham, to follow up on his parliamentary elections he held last year, to put into place the appearance of democracy in Syria as a cloak to hide his repressive state. Most dangerously, it is possible that Assad with Russian help, will attempt to instead use the UN's call for monitored elections to invite election observers from friendly states that will not actually uphold the principles of free and fair, in the Syrian election.

Now, it is my hope that the United States would not allow such a cooptation of a UN backed process. However, even a failure to implement 2254 risks further discrediting the notion of the diplomatic process in Syria, which is actually incredibly vital. If the diplomatic process loses any credibility, the chances of resolving this war peacefully continue to decrease, putting Syria on a path to an even more longterm conflict and potentially creating the next wave of jihadism globally out of Syria, due to the continued rise of the Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria who do seek ultimately to use Syria, not only to impose their extremist version of Islam, but also as a staging ground to export their jihad globally. Furthermore, the 2254 process completely leaves out the American partnered force in Eastern Syria, the Syrian democratic forces, whom both Assad and his opposition actually oppose. We thus have a significant portion of Syria in the far Northeast that is not represented for in this diplomatic process.

Thus, even a successful implementation of 2254 under current conditions would not yet stitch back together the Syrian state. Now, it is possible in theory that the US could find a way to incorporate the SDF into this process in the future. However, the most likely manner of that incorporation would be a deal between the SDF and the Assad regime that would actually strengthen the regime and thereby further decrease its incentive to negotiate a meaningful compromise. The 2254 process is thus quite disconnected from the reality on the ground. In some ways, this insulates it from major inflection such as the Turkish invasion of Northeastern Syria, which has not actually had a meaningful effect on the implementation of 2254. However, the gap between the reality on the ground and the diplomatic process will continue to undermine the chances for an actual settlement of the war.

Maseh Zarif:

In order to get UN SCR 2254 passed in the first place, American and Russian diplomats had to find some type of compromise language. Does that show you that there is some common ground from which to build?

Jennifer Cafarella:

It actually doesn't. Russia is not negotiating in good faith, but rather manipulating the diplomatic process in an attempt to co-opt it to re-legitimize the Assad regime and thereby secure Russian interests at the expense of American interests. Russia is explicitly attempting to block Western attempts to force meaningful changes on the Assad regime and actually seeks to gain international recognition of Assad and thereby to insulate him from future pressure, including future justice for the war crimes committed by his regime against the Syrian population. Since intervening in 2015 after which Russia helped to pass UN SCR 2254 Russia has repeatedly tried to dictate the implementation of 2254 and thereby sideline the United States by the resolution more or less unilaterally. In 2017 for example, Russia convened a summit and presented a new draft of a Syrian constitution to delegates invited from the Syrian opposition and pro-regime delegates, both rejected it in addition to Turkey, but the attempt reflects Russia's desire to determine the implementation of 2254 and to exclude the US meaningfully in the process.

Russia expected it would work because Russia had just weeks before helped the Assad regime and Iran seize the major urban center of Aleppo city in Northern Syria, which was a stronghold for opposition groups supported by Turkey and the United States. Russia expected that that military victory on the ground would be enough to unblock the diplomatic process and essentially compel Assad's opposition to accept the new Syrian constitution. However, Russia failed not only to force the opposition to accept this outcome, but even failed to force Assad to accept that outcome, even though it was in his interest. Assad never even sent an official delegation, but rather sent unofficial regime representatives under strict orders not to accept a new constitution.

Maseh Zarif:

On the relationship between Assad and Russia, help us understand where some of the leverage lies. Does Assad in fact have some agency and can he resist when the Russians are trying to pull him in a certain direction?

Jennifer Cafarella:

The relationships between Assad, Russia and Iran are more complex than Western policy often assumes. Their coalition is a very fragile balance between their competing interests, which sometimes but not always overlap and the balance of power between them. Russia actually has more limited capacity and bandwidth in Syria than the US often realizes. Russia cannot secure its air and Naval bases on the Syrian coast and prevent a Syrian regime collapse or contraction without the ground forces that Iran provides through proxies, as well as the IRGC force. Russia also does not have enough leverage over Assad to dictate terms to him. And Assad has repeatedly demonstrated over the course of this war that while he will accept Russian military support, he will not accept Russia's diplomatic agenda and has enough freedom on the ground to actively spoil deals that Russia brokers internationally or even on the ground inside of Syria.

As a result, Russia is actually losing influence within the Syrian opposition who initially expected that Russia would be able to guarantee terms of agreements that Russia brokers. In a very prominent example, Russia intervened in Southern Syria in July, 2018 to broker reconciliation agreements between opposition communities and the Assad regime. Russia provided a number of guarantees against reprisals by the regime if the opposition surrenders and was unable to uphold those agreements. Assad systematically violated them and not only was Russia unable to prevent those violations, the Russian military police that had been deployed to reach those agreements and stabilize the area in the near term, later withdrew because Russia doesn't have the bandwidth to sustain that kind of a presence as an open ended commitment. Assad knows this and is very skilled at exploiting opportunities to reassert his independence on the ground while simultaneously leveraging the fact that Russia's intervention in Syria does in fact require support from both Assad and Iran.

Iran may actually have more leverage over Assad than Russia. Iran provides more support in different ways than Russia does and has burrowed deeper than Russia into Syrian institutions which the Iranians have been infiltrating and attempting to co-opt since far earlier in the revolution, in 2011. Iran and Assad both do depend on the air support that Russia is able to provide, which made all of the difference in the military campaign and prevent some major losses in 2015 and beyond. However, air power alone can not force either Iran nor Assad to do anything on the ground that they oppose. Iran has also demonstrated this. The Russians have issued guarantees to both the United States and Israel that Russia will compel and oversee and Iranian withdrawal from Southern Syria, for example, and has been manifestly unable to deliver.

However, Russia has exhibited a capacity to adapt to its failures in Syria and to use its experience to develop new ways of campaigning, both in a military sense, working within a coalition of military forces and campaigning diplomatically in terms of how to compel Syrians who are calculating in both military and political terms, to accept an outcome that Russia desires. Thus far, Russia has focused far more on trying to shape the decisions of Syrian opposition groups than on shaping the decisions of the Assad regime, which therefore has not changed the overall likelihood of a political compromise to the war, but has enabled Russia to gain important experience working on local levels within communities to conduct not only military operations, but also conflict mediation.

That experience should concern the United States, but it also should provide an instructive set of case studies for how to campaign more effectively in Syria. The US continues to overlook the requirements to shape conditions on the ground in order to enable diplomacy to be successful and has thus seeded more opportunity to Russia than we need to. The US should instead recognize the limits of Russian influence and begin to compete in this space, given that Russia is in some ways over extended and can not commit significantly more resources to the Syrian theater.

Maseh Zarif:

I want to wrap up by asking you about the American approach in this phase of the conflict. Given that some of the dynamics that you've just laid out, what should the United States be doing?

Jennifer Cafarella:

The implementation of security council resolution 2254 risks doing more harm than good to the potential for peace in Syria under current conditions. The US should not walk away from diplomacy given that there is no military solution to this conflict. However, the US should recognize that conditions are not set for a near term diplomatic resolution to this war and attempting to force one through prematurely may actually make a settlement increasingly difficult. The US should halt the attempts to implement 2254 and instead refocus on a longer term goal of keeping space open within Syria for political competition. This includes recommitting to our partnership with the Syrian democratic forces in Eastern Syria and using that partnership to build and implement a political

alternative to the Assad regime in areas we have already seized from ISIS and in which our partnered forces are already implementing a form of governance that is less of a viable alternative than we could help to create.

The US should also recognize the value of engaging diplomatically on local levels in the way that the Russians have. The US has not significantly invested in engaging local populations across Eastern Syria where US forces operate and the US is also missing opportunities to support civil society actors in other parts of Syria, including the Northwest where these groups are attempting at least to limit the influence of jihadist groups like Al Qaeda. While these forms of local engagement would not immediately lead to an end to the war, they could make a very important contribution in keeping alive political diversity and in empowering elements of Syrian society that will ultimately need to accept a compromise to the war that both the jihadists and the Assad regime are currently trying to avoid. A reorientation on longterm goal of a political compromise rather than a short term attempt to force one through, also enables more creativity in defining the scope and scale of a valuable diplomatic process.

The US should work with the UN and other partners to conduct its own intro Syrian dialogue initiatives to convene meetings of various Syrian political groups that are willing to talk, without the expectation of an immediate compromise, but with the intent to keep space open for competition, including not only within Syria, but within the community of Syrians that have fled Syria and are living as refugees abroad, but who do hope to return to their country someday and to play a role in shaping the future of their nation. Yeah US can convene conferences and conduct track two initiatives quietly. There's no reason the US has to continue to limit itself to the 2254 process and in this regard, the US should actually take a page out of Russia's book who launched its own unilateral diplomatic process called the Astana process, which the Russians have used to attempt to hijack 2254 and to implement it, but also as a broader vehicle for the Russians to posture internationally and to create a convening authority to advance a variety of diplomatic agendas.

The United States could do the same but with far more legitimacy and in a manner that could actually start to put Russia and the Assad regime back on the defensive. It is time to stop seeding them diplomatic ground in the unrealistic hope of somehow reaching a political compromise, but rather take more bold and far reaching action to give Syrians back the opportunity to determine the trajectory of their own future.

Maseh Zarif:

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