Raymond Hinnebusch - rh10@st-andrews.ac.uk

In a very short time frame, the Syrian president gave two interviews, first with Jonathan Tepperman, and subsequently with Jeremy Bowen. A careful look at the balance of powers presently at work in Syria makes it difficult to understand this sudden desire to speak to the West as a mere boasting event. There really isn't much to celebrate from a military perspective. Even Darayya, a mere 15 km from central Damascus is still a battleground. Yet, there are new dynamics at work, and perhaps more important, there are events that were anticipated by the Syrian government that failed to materialise. The intervention of the West after IS became a threat that could no longer be ignored, was supposed to initiate a process that would lead to some type of working relationship with the Syrian government. This is at least what loyalist media had prophesied. True, and as Asad confirmed, there are indirect messages being conveyed regarding the Coalition's bombardment of IS positions, but this is at a level that is far below what was desired, and no where near the reintegration of Syria into the international community that Syrians loyal to the regime were promised. If one regards the rise of IS as the Syrian government's most important card, the wild card as it were, which it hoped would magically flip the hostility of the world into a joint alliance in its war 'against terror,' then this gamble has so far been a failure. Concurrently, the intervention of Iran and Hizbullah which the Syrian government had first supported and counted on, has suddenly, over the last few months, grown into something far more dramatic, with Hizbullah and Iranian forces clearly attempting to create a lasting presence on the Syrian–Israeli border. One can only imagine that no matter how close Asad feels to these foreign forces, their mere presence for over four years now, must be on some level uncomfortable, if not potentially dangerous.

Asad may have had several aims in mind in granting the interviews. First, he sought to project himself as a rational leader, with whom one can deal and as a partner in the war on terrorism, to Western audiences concerned with the terrorist threat, perhaps over the heads of Western politicians who continue to treat him as a pariah. He will also have wanted to project an image to his own constituency of resoluteness and defiance of external pressures on his government, but also to make the point that his views are sought in the West and that he cannot easily be kept isolated.

Asad's interview may also reflect his vulnerabilities on the ground and his apprehensions at this particular stage in the conflict. On the one hand the Hizbullah/Iranian presence in Syria may have started to become a bit more than he had hoped would be necessary to end this conflict. On the other hand, IS has proved to be a mixed blessing for the regime: while it has allowed Asad to demonise much of the opposition as jihadi terrorists and to portray his regime as the only alternative to IS, the latter has also become a military threat to the regime. After a year in which the regime had seemed to get the upper hand over the insurgency, it was badly rattled by the effectiveness of IS attacks, particularly on a Raqqa airbase where it abandoned many of its troops to be massacred, inflaming its own constituents against it. An attack on a crucial gas field and a car bomb in loyalist neighbourhoods of Homs undermined the confidence of Asad's constituents in his regime's ability to protect them. True, IS presently seems to be on the defensive, but if it is forced to significantly withdrawal from Iraqi held territories, it may opt to reposition its fighters in Syria, and wreck havoc on the eastern boundaries of regime held territories. Asad must be aware, too, that the demographic base of his military capacity is fraying: even among his Alawi constituents, who have suffered disproportionate casualties in the war, many are reluctant to serve and recently the regime's conscription enforcers encountered resistance from the Druze community. Asad must fear, too, that the decline in oil prices is enervating the capacity of Russia and Iran to support his regime at the levels he needs.

Hence, Asad may have been in fact, under the heavy make up of his proud terminology, reaching out for help. One statement in particular seemed out of context: "Any war ends with a political solution." Was Asad here making it known that he is open for a political solution - one that somehow restores Syria's international standing, and allows him to reassert his authority vis a vis all the forces,

including (perhaps even more important than those that are hostile) those friendly to him? Is this his way of proclaiming to the West that the forces he had deliberately ignored, IS, and the forces he had deliberately utilised, Hizbullah, are near the point of seriously undermining his authority and that this story must come to an end or the West will truly have lost Syria to fanatics from both sides?

But what remained conspicuously absent from the interviews is any type of indication of the terms on the basis of which a 'political solution' can be reached. One may assume that what Asad is truly interested in is not negotiating with the opposition, whether in Geneva or Moscow, but rather in negotiations with the West. Negotiations that would formalise his role as a full partner in the war against IS, remove his regime from international black lists, and accept some type of arrangement with the political opposition (as long it does not challenge his authority over the military and security). Against this background, the question arises, if Asad is reaching out, how should the West respond?

- ***Avoid repeating past mistakes***

It is easier to indicate the mistakes the West should avoid than what might effectively move the Syrian situation beyond the current bloody impasse. Asad's enemies still hope to turn the anti-IS intervention against him. However, the consequences of such a move would be incalculable, even if it removed Asad. However repellent the behaviour of Asad's forces, he still commands the Syrian state; however intertwined the Asad family, clans and clients with the state, the existence of the state is still an invaluable governance asset; an attack on it risks repeating the folly committed in Iraq where the US destroyed the state and left anarchy behind. At risk would be the only areas of Syria enjoying a modicum of security, the remaining urban areas and infrastructure that has not yet been destroyed in the conflict. Destruction of the regime/state would unleash ethnic cleansing and massive new refugee flows. The fallout of state collapse in Syria would spill over into Lebanon, which could likely suffer a similar implosion. Iran, one of the main forces helping to contain IS, would be antagonised. As Colin Powell is reported to have cautioned President George W Bush in the run up to the 2003 attack on Iraq, "if you break it, you own it." The West would be stuck with having to reconstruct a state from scratch, and would be unlikely to do any better than it did in Iraq. Massive troop numbers and enormous financial commitments would be required - more than in Iraq which, at least, had its own oil resources to fund reconstruction, something lacking in Syria. It is unlikely that such a venture would enjoy legitimacy on the ground in Syria any more than the US presence in Iraq did. While Saudi and Qatari money and possibly even Turkish troops might be brought into sharing the burden, their particular agendas are unlikely to be welcomed by many Syrians. The US and its allies would suffer similar enormous financial and human losses in such a failed attempt.

- ***Target External Support***

Specialists in conflict resolution identify a condition that facilitates political settlements, namely, a "hurting stalemate", is which all sides realising none can win, seek to cut their losses and split the cake. Syria has long been in such a condition. Part of the reason why the hurting stalemate has not so far translated into an agreement to stop fighting is that a war economy has incentivised many to keep the conflict going. To a great extent this war economy is fuelled from the outside—by the resources provided to all the warring sides by their external patrons; only an agreement to symmetrically reduce such support by all external patrons can dry up the war economy. Russia and Iran should have every incentive to reduce the scarce resources being expended in Asad's support at a time when their own economies are suffering; it is up to the West and its regional allies, to reciprocate. A UN resolution under chapter 7 could prohibit the flow of arms, fighters and money to both regime and opposition/s.

- ***Focus on Compromise***

The only way to resolve the Syrian conflict is through a compromise power sharing agreement. Besides the external incentive to avoid compromise, another deterrent to a settlement is that the distrust and insecurity between the warring sides in Syria is such that none can possibly trust the other

not to renege on any agreements reached. To overcome this, a power balance needs to be arranged such that both sides would be deterred from reneging on any agreement and moving against the other. In a transition period, power could be divided between the regime-controlled presidency and an opposition backed prime minister, with each empowered to veto acts by the other, on the Zimbabwe model. This would have to be founded on a similar coercive division of power; one can envision, a division of territorial security jurisdictions between regime forces and the Free Syrian Army, with international buffer forces between them, arranged in such a way that neither would have the incentive to re-start the war. Needless to say, IS (and al-Qaida avatars) both immensely complicate this scenario while, in some ways, constituting an incentive for it. Such arrangements will also be temporary, because no solution that formalises a divided Syria can succeed.

- ***Focus on Diplomacy***

None of this can be envisioned without concerted international diplomacy. There is no point in negotiating unless it is with those who have the power to conclude an agreement. That means that Asad cannot be sidelined; on the opposition side, the challenge is finding a respected leader who can deliver. What is required is a Geneva III that gets around the stalemate of Geneva II. Geneva II foundered on the insistence of the opposition that Asad could have no role in a transitional government in Syria and Asad's insistence that he would not deal with the opposition as long as it was engaged in insurgency (terrorism in his words). The threat IS poses to both sides, the sheer exhaustion after four years of fighting, the dangerous scenarios to both sides that the future may hold – all of this, may have sufficiently changed their calculations to move them out of their intransigent positions. This however could only happen via third party diplomatic intervention, and this means, at the global level, a joint US-Russian effort and at the regional level, a joint Saudi-Iranian initiative. This may seem improbable. Ironically, one of the main stumbling blocks at Geneva II, Iran's exclusion at Saudi insistence, might now be overcome as the common threat from IS has driven a certain détente between Riyadh and Tehran. At the global level, US-Russian relations have, post-Geneva II, taken such a nosedive over Ukraine that a joint diplomatic initiative would have to overcome much mutual distrust. But both Washington and Moscow are threatened by IS and the spectre of jihadi terrorism and only acting together can they effectively alleviate the danger emanating from the Syria-Iraq imbroglio. It is, then, up to Washington and Moscow to find ways to put their differences aside and re-engage in diplomacy. The only alternative is likely to be endless war.

- ***Avoid Idealist Positions***

It might be said that these proposals will not provide justice to the victims of the regime, and that they do not address the moral dimensions of this crisis. Diplomacy, however, is the art of the possible and must recognise the power balance to succeed. In a hurting stalemate, neither side can get all its wants and a durable settlement must respect the vital interests of both. Over the last four years numerous idealist proposals were set forth, and all have failed not only to resolve this tragedy, but they also failed to provide relief to those who continue to suffer in Syria. Something needs to be done, and if Asad is truly reaching out, now is the time for serious diplomacy.