Time for a Settlement in Syria

Most objective observers of the Syrian conflict now realise that neither President Bashar al-Assad nor his enemies can hope to win an outright victory. By continuing to fight, they are simply exhausting themselves and ruining their country.

The war has torn Syria apart, caused vast loss of life, displaced a large part of its population, inflicted great physical damage, and even threatened the country’s continued future as a state within recognised borders.

President Assad’s enemies have seized control of large parts of the north and east of the country, as well as of several border crossings with Turkey. About half of Aleppo – the country’s second city – is in rebel hands. But the regime is fighting back, and has recently scored some successes, although at great cost to the civilian population.

Well over a million panic-stricken Syrians have fled the country and taken refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and even, further afield, in Egypt. The number is increasing by the day. Another ten million people – about 40 per cent of Syria’s population – survive as best they can in rebel-controlled territory. Most rebel fighters remain encamped in their home areas, which they hope to defend against regime troops. But, as they lack anti-aircraft weapons, they are unable to protect their civilian populations from bombardment by government planes.

Created when Britain and France divided the Middle East between them after the First World War, the Syrian republic is now in danger of falling apart. What are the choices? Either the antagonists will persist in their life-and-death struggle, or they will decide to seek some sort of a compromise, which could save their country from possible partition. However, if the fighting continues, it will undoubtedly bring an end to Syria’s traditional role as a major player on the Middle East scene, and as the one Arab country which has been able to hold a ruthless and ambitious Israel more or less in check. That is the choice facing both the regime and its enemies.

Unfortunately, the latest developments do not seem to favour an early settlement of the Syrian crisis. In recent weeks, Moaz al-Khatib, a former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, emerged as the head of an exiled opposition body called the Syrian National Coalition. Sickened by the violence which was destroying his country, he declared that he was prepared to negotiate with the Syrian government – without first insisting that Bashar al-Assad step down. Hard-liners have angrily contested this moderate position. After much discussion and controversy, Moaz al-Khatib was forced to step down.

He has been replaced – it would appear only for the next six months -- by Georges Sabra, 66, a Syrian Communist of Greek Orthodox background, who has been active in opposition politics since the 1970s. He was jailed in Syria for eight years from 1987 to 1995, before going underground. His appointment is probably intended to wean some Christians away from Assad’s regime. But, although a brave man, Georges Sabra is not a major political figure. He may not have the necessary political weight or negotiating skills to contribute to a resolution of the conflict.

In fact, unlike Moaz al-Khatib, he has bitterly refused any compromise or negotiation with Bashar al-Assad’s regime. This is not an intelligent or constructive attitude, since it would seem that neither side can hope to win a decisive victory. The time has surely come for Syria’s antagonists to seek a compromise which will save their country from further calamities.

External powers have contributed to the present disaster. They, too, must decide whether to press forward in the hope of making gains which might bolster their own interests, or whether, on the contrary, they should encourage the warring factions in Syria to put up their guns and come to the conference table.
After more than two years of often savage war, with the loss of at least 70,000 lives and possibly many more, it is surely time to find a way out of this destructive conflict. The only sensible solution would seem to be a negotiation between the regime and its enemies under the joint auspices of both the United States and Russia, the two major external powers who, by taking sides, have so far served to keep the conflict alive.

Both Washington and Moscow are now beginning to understand that continued fighting is no longer in their interest, since the only beneficiary would be Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl al-Sham (the Front for the Defence of the Syrian People), a rebel force which has emerged as the most ruthless, the most disciplined and – because of its blind devotion to militant Islam – the most ideological of all President Assad’s opponents. It is, in fact, none other than Al-Qaida, under the assumed name of Jabhat al-Nusra. This violent Islamist movement has distinguished itself by slaughtering prisoners and carrying out dozens of devastating suicide bombings across the country, including several in central Damascus itself.

Jabhat al-Nusra was widely believed to be planning a major assault on Damascus in the coming weeks. But this attack seems to have been put temporarily on hold, as the Jabhat wrestles with the problem of having been identified as an outgrowth of Al-Qaida.

In Washington, London, Paris and elsewhere – and also in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states -- the will to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad is still there. But there is beginning to be some hesitation in helping the opposition destroy the Syrian regime if it means putting Al-Qaida in power in its place. It is clearly in no country’s interest – whether in the East or the West – for this violent movement to entrench itself in Syria and further destabilise an important but already fragile region.

Appalled by the widespread turmoil, many Syrians are anxious to spare their country further destruction. One organisation which, from the very start, refused to take part in armed conflict, and which has pressed for negotiations with the regime without preconditions, is the so-called National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. Its main spokesman, Haytham Manna, has from the beginning opposed foreign intervention in Syria. He has repeatedly appealed for a negotiated solution to the Syrian war. He has bitterly opposed the recent decision taken in Istanbul to form a Syrian government in exile, as well as the move, driven by Qatar, to give Syria’s seat in the Arab League to the opposition. For long, Manna was virtually ignored. But, as casualties have mounted in Syria and as a cruel stalemate seems to be taking hold, his National Coordination Committee has gained ground and is at last beginning to be heard.

It is surely time for Syrians to unite to save their country from further senseless destruction.

*Patrick Seale, a leading British writer and journalist on the Middle East, the Observer’s former correspondent*