"Peace" in Pieces: The Tragedy of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan

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It is tempting to call most reporting on the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan "blind and stupid." This, however, is unfair to journalists – whose job is primarily to report current news and not to speculate about its ultimate meaning or the future. The phrase "blind and stupid" should be applied to most policymakers, strategists, and think tank analysts who try to address these wars – people whose mission is not only to think about the future, but to propose credible solutions to emerging and easily foreseeable problems.

Roads to Hell Without "Good," or Even Enough "Intentions," to Describe the Road

In all three cases, each war is generally being approached from one of two inherently ridiculous perspectives. The first perspective is simply to focus on the security side and tactical situation – an approach that ignores all the other causes of instability and unrest, defines "victory" in inherently unworkable terms, or sees minor tactical victories as somehow a reason for continuing the fight with no clear plan to end it.

These is also a dangerous tendency to focus on defeating the ISIS caliphate without regard to the threat posed by of the other factions and extremist movements, and the other causes of the fighting in Syria and Iraq – a worst case that has a near mirror image in Afghanistan in focusing on the tactical outcomes of fights with the Taliban or ISIS rather than shaping some kind of credible civil-military order for the future.

The second perspective is to focus on some narrow approach to peace negotiations or simply winning tactical encounters to the point where the other sides cannot continue. The end result could easily be to create a peace that leaves all of the causes of the war intact without any credible plan or effort to achieve future stability.

As is discussed shortly, the worst of the three cases seems to be Syria. There seems to be a de facto willingness to accept an Assad victory in most of the country– including an Assad victory in Idlib – and let go of the Kurdish-Arab enclave in Syria's northeast once ISIS no longer controls actual territory. The end result would seem to be yet another version of a "peace" that ends all peace.

Afghanistan, however, is a close second. Here, the idea of "peace" seems to be to bring the government and the Taliban to the table and begin a peace progress with no clear idea of what comes next or why the resulting peace agreement should work.

Iraq does offer more elements of hope, but not if the U.S. disengages or leaves the civil dimension unaddressed.

In all three cases, the most flattering description that can be given to such approaches to the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan is that the road to hell will be paved with good intentions. However, even the intentions seem far too vague to be good and it is far from clear whether such advocates can even begin to describe a road.

The Assad Nightmare

Syria is the most immediate case where the end results can be disastrous. The Algerian fight against its Islamist extremists showed the sheer violence and repression can win, but Algeria's military
junta at least had brought support and many elements of effective governance. Assad has no such elements of legitimacy and no clear ability to sustain a rule of repression without dependence on Iran and the Hezbollah.

Assad is a symbol of rule by a relatively tiny Alawite minority rule in a country that the CIA estimates is 74% Sunni – most not only opposed to Assad but displaced, killed and wounded, or made into refugees where the trends in two year old UN estimates would now indicate that more than 350,000 Sunnis have died in fighting with the Assad faction, and where the World Bank estimates that at least half of the entire population in 2011 has now been made into internally displaced persons (IDPs) (6.3 million) or refugees (4.9 million).

The 13% of the population that are Shi’ites may side or live with the Alawites, but many of the Arab rebel factions have been as violently opposed to Shiites and Alawites. The 10% that were Christian in 2011 are now an unknown remnant, but scarcely a secure one. The 9.7% that are Kurdish, Armenian, and other has only partial citizenship when the civil war began and now are largely in a northeast enclave with very uncertain backing, no clear economic options, and no reason to put hope in Assad.

No one has yet addressed a credible future role for Israel, Russia, Iran, the Hezbollah, or Turkey – to the extent pre-Idlib fighting, U.S. withdrawal, and a new government in Iraq make this possible – or what kind of Assad structure can or should emerge if he does appear to "win." No one seems to notice that past peace negotiations and aid conferences have never created a viable state or economy.

Yet, no one seems to have tied either their recommendations for warfighting or peace efforts to clear plans for sustained and effective humanitarian aid – much less recovery, reconstruction, and coping with the fact that studies like the World Bank's *The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria* indicate that the fighting has cost Syria at least the equivalent of another decade's worth of development. The CIA estimates that, "Syria's economy has deeply deteriorated amid the ongoing conflict that began in 2011, declining by more than 70% from 2010 to 2017."

No one has tied any form of Assad victory to viable proposals for a future Syrian economy, or bringing Syrian refugees and IDPs back to a normal life. No one has a solution to the critical youth bulge and underemployment problems that the UN and Arab development reports indicated existed before the civil war even began.

David Petraeus famously asked at the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003, "How does this end?" The questions in Syria are different. They are rather, "Where the hell will an Assad-ruled Syria be in two years? Where does the need for repression take Assad and drive Syria's people? Who will help the repressor with billions after billions of dollars worth of aid, and then ensure that such aid actually reaches all the people? What comes after defeating ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)?"

**Afghanistan: Will Any Peace Negotiations Simply Be War by Other Means?**

Virtually everyone working in international relations has heard Clausewitz's famous aphorism that, "War is simply the continuation of political intercourse with the addition of other means." Far fewer seem to remember Henry Kissinger's warning that politics is an extension of war by other means – although recent cases like Cambodia and Nepal show all too clearly that peace efforts can sometimes be as good a route to victory as battles.
The current focus on simply bring the Taliban to the negotiating table is yet another case of failing to ask both how does this end and what comes next. Becoming obsessed with a temporary ceasefire and forgetting the real world outcome of the Christmas ceasefire in 1914 is another. So is confusing the divided and corrupt government in "Kabulstan" with effective governance, or assuming that the Taliban is any more tired of seventeen years of a war of attrition than the Afghan government forces.

The current debate over how much territory is disputed, and the government and movements like the Taliban control is a warning that no one really know how peace negotiations would proceed. The UN and the World Bank have both warned about a rise in civilian casualties, and the World Bank warned in April 2018 that,

- The security situation has worsened. Civilian casualties are at their highest since 2002, with an unprecedented level of conflict-induced displacement. In 2017, The United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 10,000 civilian casualties. During the same period, more than 202,000 Afghans were internally displaced by conflict and 44,000 others were displaced by natural disasters. A surge in returnees from Iran and Pakistan (over 296,000 in 2017) has brought mounting pressure on humanitarian assistance.

The World Bank did see progress in fiscal stability, but not in the civil areas most critical to "hearts and minds":

- Because of the sluggish economic growth and the deteriorating security situation since 2011, the poverty rate increased to 39.1 percent in 2013-14 (latest available survey data), up from 36 percent in 2011-12, meaning that 1.3 million people fell into poverty over this period.

- Rural areas, where most of the population lives, saw the biggest increase, from 38.3 to 43.6 percent. Labor demand in the off-farm sector declined. Most of the jobs created in the service sector during the pre-transition phase were lost.

- The most recent household survey showed an increase of about 1 percentage point in the unemployment rate over the past two years. In 2013/14, the unemployment rate stood at 22.6 percent, with the female unemployment rate two and a half times higher than the male rate. Unemployment is particularly severe amongst low-skilled, illiterate workers, who historically are at the greatest risk of falling into poverty.

What is even worse is the lack of any clear definition by most advocates of peace negotiations of exactly what such negotiations should accomplish. There is no clear plan to tie any peace to civil development and dealing with the deep ethnic and sectarian divisions that divide the country. There is no plan to use a peace agreement to bring effective and honest governance to what the World Bank governance indicators is one of the worst governed countries in the world.

Afghanistan is a country that Transparency International ranks as the 4th most corrupt government out of the 180 governments it ranks. It is also a nation and where power brokers, warlords, and narco-thugs can be as serious a set of problems as the Taliban. There is no clear plan for effective future elections, much less a peace, and as how the country should be reshaped to bring a real hope of stability and development.

The UN's human development indicators for Afghanistan are dismal. The World Bank indicates that Afghanistan’s level of poverty has been increasing since 2008, and the CIA reports that 54.5% of the entire population lives below the poverty line and it has a dependency ratio of 88.5. Key cities like Kabul have become slums and poverty centers as many Afghans have left an insecure countryside. Afghanistan's only major export is narcotics, it has one of the most serious "youth bulges" and employment problems in the world.
Once again, no one has shown how peace negotiations (or continued warfighting) can deal with a failed state's neighbors: Pakistan, Russia, Iran, the other "stans," and China. Proposals to include the Taliban in the government or divide the country are fuzzy at best. SIGAR and the Lead Inspector General raise serious questions about the effectiveness of the Afghan forces, and troops that often have no other source of income or real incentive to fight. The number of desertions and "absences" bears a growing resemblance to the ARVN before its collapse, and no one has begun to propose a plan for phasing out U.S. airpower, train and assist, and combat air support.

Put bluntly, calling for negotiations seems no better than calling for open ended fighting. Even if you get peace negotiations, what the hell is the peace? And, if the negotiations fail or drag on indefinitely, do we stay indefinitely or declare victory and leave?

**Iraq: Hope versus Internal Self-Destructiveness Mixed with Outside Arms, Iran, and Civil Neglect**

If there is anything approaching a bright spot among the three wars, it is Iraq. It has suffered from almost continuous crises and periods of conflict since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, and it was scarcely well governed or peaceful before then. However, the UN and World Bank estimate that its level of civilian casualties, IDPs, and refugees has been limited compared to those in Syria and Afghanistan, and that the worst effects of war have been concentrated in the Sunni areas in its West – leaving its largely Shi'ite areas in the East and much of its Kurdish zone less affected.

Iraq has lost decades of development opportunities since 1980, but Iraq still has the petroleum resources to pay for future development and to meet many of the needs of all its people if it can only create an effective state of governance and the unity to do so. Unlike the scene of most failed state wars, Iraq is only seriously damaged, not shattered.

The practical problem, however, is that Iraq is its own worst enemy and suffers from deep self-inflicted wounds. It has emerged from a bitter fight against ISIS as divided as ever along sectarian (Sunni vs. Shiite) and ethnic (Arab vs. Kurd vs. Turcoman vs. minority) lines. Iran has penetrated deeply into its security and Shi'ite power structure, Turkey threatens its Kurdish areas, its armed forces are still weak and in transition, it had its second failed national election in 2018 and one that again has acted largely to make rival factions turn on each other rather than compromise and govern effectively.

Transparency International ranks Iraq as the 11th most corrupt country in the world – better than 3rd for Syria and 4th for Afghanistan, but still relatively dismal. The World Bank *Systemic Country Diagnostic* and 2017 *Economic Diagnostic* warn that Iraq faces major problems, and while the World Bank seems remarkably optimistic about its postISIS recovery for a country with no clear government or plan for the future, the Bank warned in its April 2018 *Economic Outlook* that,

- The ISIS war and the protracted reduction in oil prices have resulted in a 21.6 % contraction of the non-oil economy since 2014 and contributed to a sharp deterioration of fiscal and current accounts. Higher oil prices and better security in 2017 contributed to economic stability and a return to growth in the non-oil sector.
- The ISIS war and widespread insecurity have also caused the destruction of infrastructure and assets in ISIS-controlled areas, diverted resources away from productive investment, severely impacted private sector consumption and investment confidence, and increased poverty, vulnerability and unemployment. The poverty rate increased from 19.8 percent in 2012 to an estimated 22.5% in 2014. The unemployment rate is about twice as high in the governorates most affected by ISIS compared to the rest of the country (21.6% versus 11.2%).
• Because of increased oil production and exports, overall GDP growth remained positive in the 2015-2016 period but is estimated to have contracted by 0.8 percent in 2017 due to a 3.5% reduction in oil production to fulfill the OPEC+ agreement and further oil output reduction from areas that returned under the GOI’s control.

• At the end of 2017, the cumulative real losses due to the conflict stood at 72 percent of the 2013 GDP and 142% of the 2013 non-oil GDP. The improved security situation and initial reconstruction efforts have sustained non-oil growth at 4.4% in 2017. The pegged exchange rate and subdued demand have kept inflation low at around 0.1% in 2017.

These challenges are particularly severe because Iraq also has a long history of poor governance in each of the six areas the World Bank rates, including corruption. These problems in governance have helped lead to critical shortfalls in electric power and serious infrastructure problems. They have also triggered a recent series of riots and demonstrations against the government even in its relatively secure Shiite areas in its Southeast. The attendance at these demonstrations have also shown Iraq faces massive economic challenges and problems in creating effective employment for both its youth and general population.

The U.S. is again part of these problems. The U.S. government seems to have largely abandoned efforts to provide the kind of aid and political efforts that address these civil issues, and its level of commitment to providing effective post-ISIS military support is somewhat uncertain even if Iran does not succeed in limiting U.S. efforts. At least some U.S. experts also seem to be claiming an early victory against ISIS while others indicate ISIS still has some 15,000-30,000 fighters left in Iraq and Syria.

The U.S. focus on ISIS seems particularly dangerous not only in terms of Iraqi civil stability but because the U.S. START database on terrorism indicates that there were some 18,802 incidents of terrorism in Iraq and Syria between 2012 and 2017, and ISIS only accounted for 5,437 (29%) of them and Al Qaida for only 386 incidents or 2.1%. Being obsessed with the worst current part of the problem of terrorism scarcely means solving it.

In short, standing aside in Iraq can be as bad a solution as accepting Assad in Syria or focusing on undefined and open-ended peace negotiations in Afghanistan. The strategic stakes in Iraq are also far higher. Iraq is a major oil power, a critical buffer against Iran, and a far more dangerous source of future conflicts that can directly threaten key U.S. strategic interests.

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