

**PAPER**

**The unresolved question of Iraq and Syria: global interventionism in the new phase of action**

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***Introduction***

There has been a reactivation of conflict in the Middle East following the unprecedented events that have led to an all-out civil war in Syria. The skirmishes continue with increasing ferocity as the conflict is embroiled in a regional and global dimension. The current situation is ripe with the ingredients of international solidarity in combating terrorism and maintaining a sober modicum of peace in the Middle East. In this background it is incumbent that the embroiled effects of wars and invasions in the region have seen multifaceted after effects. One of which was the Iraqi case where continued series unrest has led to non-existent peace. This paper attempts to identify the complex and interwoven link between Iraqi conflict: the unresolved question of Iraq with the state of the Syrian crisis.

It aims to trace the relevance of Iraqi conflict and Syrian case with the unmitigated influence of some regional actors: whose interests are given a special focus in the course of this article. Following the Geneva talks on Syria it has been seen that even after the cease fire, the escalation of the intensity of war has not mellowed down as the parties are far from actualizing the pact of war that have simultaneously acted to complicate the roadmap for peace. The paper discusses in

length the Iraqi conflict succeeded by the American interventionism explaining the political dilemma that confronts the country. Furthermore issues and causes of tensions including sectarianism, rising political instability, rise of ISIS and role of Russian interventionism is also dealt with in detail. The role of the regional and international actors in the due course of time is another theme that is followed.

Given the link between Iraqi context in understanding the conflict in Syria; it becomes significantly crucial as one set of happening in the former is somewhat effecting the latter specifically to identify problems and challenges on a multiplicity of platforms. Notwithstanding terrorism, the role of major international actors like U.S, Turkey, Europe, and Russia calls for action combined with the joint strategy to fight the ISIS. The following elaborated analysis of factors that are significant in terms of understanding the nature of the problems that manifest in the current scenario.

***The failure of the political process in Iraq:*** A significant point of reference is the nature of sectarian politics in Iraq which has created more internal political rifts as has been seen never before. Let us dwell into it a little further.

***Sectarianism:*** Enlarged the space of division among the individuals from different groups and shrinking the area of toleration and pluralism. This division was exploited by fundamentalists and Ba'ath comrades to challenge the democratic experience. Going back to the historical discourse of terrorism in Iraq after 2003; it is noticed that terrorist organizations took advantage of political circumstances in the domestic arena. The U.S invasion of Iraq in some ways was

unwelcomed by segments of the Iraqi population despite the antagonism towards Saddam's regime.<sup>1</sup>This position towards Saddam did not prevent the Iraqis of expressing their rejection to the U.S intervention at the same time each direction represents a specific sector in the society as well as a regional player or players.

However, the complexity of the rising anti U.S sentiment together with the lack of support towards responding to the U.S' invasion- was interpreted as a consequence of what had been captioned as “the clash of civilization”<sup>2</sup> “In the midst of serious efforts for the post war rebuilding, construction and development of Iraq there was absolutely no political ground that could be agreed upon on a mutual platforms. Divisions between the Sunnis and Shi’ite remained a major hallmark in the post Saddam period. No outstanding reconciliation and political dialogue could supersede the precarious ethnic balance in the country. The nature of the situation was such that this vacuum was later filled up to provide space for the terrorists and the fundamentalists who were quick to exploit the opportunity to redress themselves the lacunas in the public sphere. The Sunni component tried to take hold of the situation and galvanize the politics in its own favor from the clutches of the Shi’a domination.

From this perspective it is important to trace the very factor of the emergence of Daesh in the North West and the West of Iraq, which is dominated by the Sunnis. There followed a major

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<sup>1</sup>Saddam Hussein carved a system of governance which demanded obedience to the public domain, in which he  
<sup>2</sup>The term *Clash of Civilizations* is a theory that people's cultural and religious [identities](#) will be the primary source of conflict in the post-[Cold War](#) world. It was proposed by [political scientist Samuel P. Huntington](#) in a 1992 lecture at the [American Enterprise Institute](#), which was then developed by [Foreign Affairs](#) in 1993.

displacement of masses resulting in a terrible humanitarian situation. The combination of factors that made the situation more explosive were furthermore exacerbated by troubling domestic factors marred with problems on political and strategic fronts. It was a combination of these factors that paved the way to intensify the nature of conflict in Iraq. In the following section we look at the role of internal and external causes of instability based on the following factors:

***The Complex Nature Of The Political Instability In Iraq:***

The causes of the political instability in Iraq were manifold and have been addressed on the basis of three categorizations; Internal, Regional and External. It is important to streamline that the major problems existing at the internal front was that of the political tugging among the various political parties that deepened the course of the sectarian strife; together with the issue of the ethno-political dispute between Baghdad and Kurdistan; as well as the security dilemma that spread on the vast parts of the Iraqi territory; Nevertheless these issues that surmised the country were a direct result of the underlying causes of deep mistrust among the different groups of Iraqi society which polarized the precariously existing ideological dispute between the Islamic and the secular political parties.

The regional factor of instability predominantly concerned the strategic context, which affected the government's inability to control the terrorist inflow into the country. Many regional states detected the existence of American army in Iraq as a threat, for instance Syria and Iran, while some others rejected the progress of democratic political process for various political reasons

such as Saudi Arabia and The complexity of positions taken by the actors furthered the already fragile situation in the country giving further room to political uncertainty in the post Saddam era. Furthermore, the political crisis in Syria compounded the matters to unmagnified proportions. One would call this complexity of regional situation and positions regarding post Saddam' Iraq, the *soft path* that paves the way to the foreigner terrorists that headed to Iraq. Bassam Tibi comments that the soft path *“brought liberation from the tyranny of the Sunni minority, but it replaced Saddam’s dictatorship with a tyranny of the Shi’a parties, which came from the exile in Iran.”* This is not democratization. One can hardly proclaim democracy when the Mahdi army forbids posting the pictures of parliamentary candidates competing against the Sadrists.”<sup>3</sup> Tibbi further comments that *it became clear....in Iraq, that the regime change did not equal democratization. Democracy might be universal, but still one cannot escape local constraints and cultural peculiarities.”*

Coming to the question of the external factors contributing directly to the country’s instability was Saddam’s ouster from power in the midst of corresponding US invasion in 2003. The removal of the most powerful secular nationalist regimes in the Middle East resulted in the onslaught of the Islamist movements that began to find the institutional space in a bid to power. According to Tibi, *“By contesting the universality of democratic values, the Islamists end up*

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<sup>3</sup>Bassam, Tibi, 2012, *“Islam and Islamism”*, Yale University Press, 107.

*legitimizing particularism as an expression of Arab authenticity*”<sup>4</sup>. Thus, The complete failure of the Bush administration’s “regime change” in Iraq, an effort to create a democratic culture by military force, led some to speak of an incompatibility between Islam and democracy.

Islamism emerged as the language of self-assertion to mobilize those largely middle class high achievers who felt marginalized by the dominant economic, political or cultural processes in their societies. In a sense, it was the Muslim middle class’s way of rejecting what they considered as their exclusion from mainstream – their national elites, secular governments, and the western allies. Hence, they rebuffed “western cultural domination”, its political rationale, moral sensibilities, and normative symbols, even though in practice they shared many of those traits as in their neck-ties, food, education, and technologies.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Looking up towards the modalities: A Quid Pro Quo for Iraq?***

Following the huge sectarian rift and combined with the ongoing failure of addressing the political issues in Iraq, a very significant point that comes to question is; whether there is any quid pro quo for Iraq. Coming to terms with this question can be useful in highlighting on the problems and the necessity to act on the fundamental issues that might be dealt as under. One

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 112.

<sup>5</sup>Asef, Bayat, 2007, "*Islam And Democracy, What Is The Real Question?*" Amsterdam University Press, 14.

very important aspect that should be addressed here is the preoccupation as to how the Iraqi government can manage with the onslaught of Daesh. In this regard, some steps are needed to be achieved:

1- The Iraqi government and the legislative power must ensure the durability of the democratic regime. There must be no alternative to democracy in Iraq. All political reforms must be constitutional.

2- Strengthen the credibility of the Iraqi army. The military and security apparatus must be out of the political game. It must be a doctrinal institution that works for national interest.

3- Iraqi government must adopt a smart foreign policy. One would call it "smooth policy" that seeks to attract as much as possible friends in the regional and international arena. The aim is to achieve a zero enemy situation. Iraq can play a fundamental role in the regional game to create a solid agreement to spread peace and stability. One can say that Iraq has no enough energy and potency to play this regional active role. The reality is Iraq can play it whereby all axes need to find a player that can put them together on one table to engage negotiations. Iraq has a strong relationship with Iran and for that bonus other regional countries need Iraq to open a gate with Iran. No one can ignore the growing role that Iran has been playing in the regional issues.

4- Politically, the government should take into consideration: i.e. the need to implement the federal system in Iraq. Federalism does not mean fragmentation or division. For 12 year, the Iraqi consecutives governments have ignored this necessity especially with respect to the special

case of Kurdistan. Thus, Federal system guarantees the reasonable distribution of power among central government and the local authorities. It also guarantees the just distribution of wealth. ii. To amend the constitution. iii. To amend the electoral system.

5- Economically, the government has to create a special committee that consists specialists and experts in finance and economy. Its aim is to find out new resources and engines to the macro economy in Iraq.

***The Iraqi politics in the background of the Russian intervention in Syria: Motivation and Objectives:***

The case of the Russian intervention in Syria beginning in September 2015; that pre-necessarily claimed to fight and combat the ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and to retain the government of Bashar-Al Assad has actually added a new twist to the situation on ground and turned the nature of the political turmoil in Iraq to an unprecedentedly unique dimension. Many western and regional specialists have brought to the fore the experience of Soviet Union in Afghanistan amounting it as the new cold war; one that would escalate the feeling of resentment and despondency across the Muslim world. The Russian intervention will eventually determine whether the mission would reap any plausible results for Russia itself; as it itself remains vulnerable domestically and isolated abroad and whether it could substantially contribute in diminishing the ISIS control from Syria once and for all?



The Russian intervention in Syria apart from the very issue of ISIS also raises many underlying queries and pertinent questions to begin with; The First and foremost would as to why would Russia want to be involved in the Syrian battlefield in the very first place? The answer to the question might not be easy but without any singular answer. However, The Russian cause could be well understood from reasons such as; to defend an ally; to protect its own access to Middle East as part of a wider deal with Iran to tip the balance against Sunni rebel groups and finally; to join international coalition against ISIS.

Irrespective of these concerns, that have been believed to provide the primary motivation for intervention; the unique reason is to claim itself to be in a position to set the conditions of political solution along with controlling the post conflict situation in Syria. As Moscow does not want to let Islamists control over Syria and any attempt that it deems threatening Russia's national security could be met with a serious opposition. Nikolay Kozhanov<sup>6</sup> of The Carnegie Moscow Center predicts that *“Russia's definition of terrorists targets may extend beyond ISIS .Russia would like to play its role as a strategic coalition. It would prefer to work within the coalition of (Iran, Iraq and Syria) without coordinating with international coalition led by the U.S. Russia would accept any political settlement to stop the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The settlement may give a contemporary role to Assad. Additionally, Russia wants to launch a diplomatic*

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<sup>6</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia's Military Intervention in Syria Makes it a Key Regional Player", Carnegie Moscow Center, 1 October 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/10/01/russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria-makes-it-key-regional-player/iinm>.

*breakthrough from its own stance of power on the Syrian ground.”<sup>7</sup>Ulrich Schmidt<sup>8</sup>, on the other hand believes that Russian involvement churns out because “*Putin wants to break out the isolation over Russian role in International arena with respect to Ukraine crises.*” In a similar vein, Max Fisher<sup>9</sup> sets another group of reasons of the Russian intervention: “*Firstly, it is an act of fear. Secondly, it is not against IS but against the moderate opposition that is supported by the U.S. and thirdly this intervention is striking a grand bargain to get western concessions about some other fundamental issues such as embargo, energy policies and security arrangements.*” Furthermore, Dr. Thomas Schnidinger<sup>10</sup>warns that “*Russia's offensive has the potential to turn Syria into another Afghanistan.* While warning that Russian behavior will drive the non-jihadists to join ISIS or Al-Nusra in Syria he predicts that “*the jihadists will have the upper hand in the negotiation process so far as their control over the Syrian territory.*”*

However, one major issue with this prediction is that the Jihadists do not have the will to engage in negotiation with any partner over their objectives as they do not see the others as prospective partners. Most jihadists consider the outsiders as infidels. It is important to note that in this

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<sup>7</sup>Earlier to the Paris attacks, Germany, Italy and Britain support a transitional role for Assad while the French position has a middle stance. France stresses the need for a political transition which excludes Al-Assad and combines elements of the regime and the moderate opposition. One would agree that such a settlement would find its way into the opposition bank more than into the regime side. The opposition would accept to work with the regime without Al-Assad with respect to Russian military campaign.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from: Tim Lister, The reasons of Russian intervention in Syria, CNN.com. 1/10/2015.

<sup>9</sup>Max Fisher, "Putin's Military Intervention in Syria, Explained", 30 September 2015,

<http://www.vox.com/2015/9/24/9392543/russia-syria-putin>

see also: Max Fisher, The four reasons Russia won't give up Syria, no matter what Obama does, The Washington Post, 5 September, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/09/05/the-four-reasons-russia-wont-give-up-syria-no-matter-what-obama-does/>.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from: Kim Traill, The Russian intervention in Syria, www.abc.net.au. 22/10/2015.

connection terrorist leaders like Abu Muhammed Aljolani<sup>11</sup> has called the mujahedeen to launch a series of attacks on Russians everywhere no matter those are civilians or militants.<sup>12</sup>

***The Syrian case: Regional actors and Russia:***

In the introduction there has been a repeated emphasis that the crisis in Syria is a direct link of reference to that of Iraq. This section covers the Iraqi influence on the Syrian crisis and its regional and global ramifications.

The regional coalition between Turkey and the Arab Gulf states aims at the first to address Iran and not Russia. To abort the Iranian project they know that they have to destroy the regime in Syria due to the fact that it is the corner stone of this project. Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia continue to support the FSA (The Free Syrian Army) with the necessary military equipment to keep their position up in front of the regime and that would embarrass Russia and weaken their position in the negotiation. They believe that without the Baath regime in Syria, the project of Russia's coalition in the region will lose its coherence and fail to meet the strategic conditions. Arab Gulf countries try to close the gap between FSA (The Free Syrian Army) and Islamists to vanish the Iranian project in the region. This project stands on three main pillars: The Russian presence in Syria; Al-Assad's regime and Hizb-ullah in Lebanon; and the nuclear agreement

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<sup>11</sup>Aljazeera.net: Russian Intervention in Syria for the sake of? A survey of a cluster of Arab specialists about Syrian crisis, 6 October 2015.

<sup>12</sup>ibid

with the U.S. Thus, the regional coalition between Turkey and Arab Gulf states aims to counterweigh Iran in the first step rather than to counter the Russians.

In this situation it is interesting to see the position of Iraq vis a vis priorities and goals? There are many questions that need to be addressed in this context; will it be in Iraq's interest to favor a deal between Russia and the U.S to fight terrorism, or will it encourage a regional coalition that takes in consideration regional stability over Al-Assad's removal for the time being? To this aim, Iraq seeks to find key players that have the credibility of putting together all regional agendas in one. One would suggest that Egypt and Algeria would play such a role in this critical situation. Considering that Egypt has a closed relationships with Arab Gulf States and especially with The Gulf Emirates and Saudi Arabia, would it be possible and probable for Egypt and other important regional players to have to take on their shoulders this responsibility of reaching a political agreement between a moderate position and the regime in Syria?

***The Syrian Quagmire and the global actors' power play:***

Max Fisher<sup>13</sup> adds that Russian intervention is not an enough force to be a game changer in Syria. He attributes that the media in U.S. has overhyped it to escalate public opinion with respect to some old fashion pictures derived from the Soviet's ambition during the cold war.

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<sup>13</sup> Max Fisher., *ibid.*

This escalation of public perception would pave the way towards a new grand strategy in the Middle East. Still the US. Will not risk launching a counter intervention in Syria.

Actually the U.S is not in rush to take a counter strike by supporting some rebelled groups in the Russian territory. Mahjoob Zwery<sup>14</sup>, an Arab specialist, concludes that the United States' position is not weak in the region. He reasons the declining of the U.S' role in the region to the fact that its policy is very well calculated within the smart power strategy that is adopted by the Obama's administration. The U.S is in a tactical withdrawal phase to assess the capabilities of regional key players in order to set a new strategy towards the region. Here, one would revisit the U.S experience in Iraq in the post 2003 Iraqi intervention; whereby it was controlling everything in Iraq due to its military existence over the Iraqi territory. In contrast, it could not control all. One would argue that it was expected that the U.S could install a government that was totally loyal to its policies but what happened was the contrary. The Iraqi government in 2005 was closer to Iran than to the U.S. Some of the other reasons for the U.S failure in Iraq have also been attributed as a result of the popular outrage over the American invasion, Islamic political parties dominated the political scene and thirdly the domestic and international pressure to hand over power to the elected government. The result was simply that the U.S was not the biggest winner in Iraq. This experience drove the U.S. to calculate carefully its 'priorities in the Middle East.

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<sup>14</sup> Mahjoob Zwery's comment on Aljazeera.net: Russian Intervention in Syria for the sake of? A survey of a cluster of Arab specialists about Syrian crisis, 6 October 2015.

This makes the whole context rather interesting as to whether the U.S will accept Al-Assad as part of the solution or will ask Russia to support an alternative from of the Syrian regime taking into consideration that Iran is a vital player with respect to the regional issues.

***The scenarios of the frontlines based on the ground of Russian intervention in Syria:***

While Michael Kofman<sup>15</sup> predicts that “*Moscow, after stabilizing the regime in Syria, will seek to craft a new political process, likely working with European nations but with the vintage goal of forcing the US to accept the fact that Assad will stay in power for the time being. The Russians have taken the responsibility for the Syrian case in their own hands and have started their own initiative in the Syrian conflict*”; Thomas Friedman,<sup>16</sup> opines that “*the Russian intervention is in the interest of the peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict. He predicts that this intervention will agitate the Arabic streets against Russia and thus it desperately needs to move up quickly by asking the regime to engage in constructive negotiations.*” He is of the opinion that the “*International community has no choice to avoid Russia as a key player towards the Syrian conflict. Thus, United States and Russia will be inexorably linked to each other and will intentionally and unintentionally will help each other. However, if on the one hand the U.S. continues bombarding ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and on the other hand, the Russians also continue*

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<sup>15</sup>Michael Kofman, The Russian Intervention In Syria: Policy Options and Exit Strategies, [www.warontherocks.com](http://www.warontherocks.com)

<sup>16</sup>Thomas Friedman, "Syria, Obama and Putin", The New York Times, 30 September 2015.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/opinion/thomas-friedman-syria-obama-and-putin.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/opinion/thomas-friedman-syria-obama-and-putin.html?_r=0)

*doing the same as well as striking the opposition regime; then both the operations would be complimentary to each other on the ground.”* In the meanwhile, it is visible that the U.S. does not want to have to meet the Russians halfway in this crisis. In this regard, therefore, what is presumed is that no matter whatever capacities are unleashed toward Syria; there is little hope that operational or logistical coordination between Russia and the U.S. will take place.

Retrospectively, it becomes incumbent for the regional players to take their initiatives seriously and if a regional coalition is needed, then it must consist of five regional players: Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq.

Mohamed Sabra<sup>17</sup> a Syrian specialist discusses this scenario by emphasizing that the regional interrelationships are so complicated to be resolved with respect to the Syrian crisis. He predicts that *“the prospect of regional cooperation is weak due to the de facto conflict that prevails over the regional scene.”* He further adds that the *“major dispute within the regional players will be over Al-Assad’s regime and if once he is gone; the resolution will go faster.”*

One could argue that the Arab Gulf countries can presume pressure on Russia through supplying the opposition with money and military wares which would essentially aim at abandoning Al-Assad. Egypt as well will not stay silent on this situation. Egyptian foreign minister has already declared their support to Saudi Arabia and the international coalition in this crisis but Egypt

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<sup>17</sup>Mohamed Sabra, Russian Intervention in Syria as a Strike against Saudi Arabia {Altadakhol Alrossy fi Syria thid Saudiyat}, 1 October 2015, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/255972>.

leaves one window open to dialogue with Russia and the Syrian regime. Thus, Egypt may play the mediator role to initiate a political solution that accepts Al-Assad as peace partner in this critical era. There has been a debate on the regional actor's priorities towards Syria in the preceding paragraphs.

***Conclusion:***

From what has been inferred as a part and parcel of a regional and international solution to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, there has been a total silence within the International community to link the two. The failure of a sound diplomatic and political solution in case of Iraq is reminiscent that if mistakes are repeated, the results will be detrimental. The case of Iraq and Syria are therefore inextricably linked. Regarding the interests and roles of international and region actors in Syria it could be assumed that a worthwhile solution could be provided by the smooth exit of the players with a win- win situation for all hitherto through a peaceful political settlement of the conflict.

In response to the situation discussed in the final paragraphs, it is apparent that both the global and the regional players jumped to respond to the situation from different grounds. Iran and Russia endorse Al-Assad while the U.S and majority of the NATO allies try to exercise their muscle against the staying in power of the Al-Assad's regime. Matters have become complicated in the aftermath of the Paris attacks on 13 November which have turned the balance of support in line with fighting against the ISIS as an all-out war. The global coalition against



the jihadi group has been channelized with all its might to bring it to a conclusive end. Although differences in recent days have emerged between Turkey and Russia; following the shooting down of the Russian war plane over the Turkish zone, Turkey has vociferously denied that it holds any apology for the incident. Turkey in the meanwhile has also been allegedly held responsible for the tacit support of the ISIS with respect to facilitating its enormous oil imports that it is complicit of buying. The Erdogan government which has recently won elections in Turkey following an unstinting Turkish vote bank to his support has been resilient to take a defensive position not only against Russia but also towards the blame letting within the NATO of his soft underbelly for the ISIS.

The global and the regional coalition against ISIS have been wrought with its inherent weaknesses. The point here is how such differences of opinions, policy takes and even diplomatic overtures can impact the war on ISIS. One big question that remains significant is that: In the background of the coalition's renewed demands on Turkey what impact would such pressures unleash on Turkish membership in NATO, balance of influence of regional and global power politics in Syria; hegemony and counter hegemonic ambitions among the global actors as an offshoot of their interests in the Syrian case as well as the enemy contingency following the course of events.

In this regard, one must refer to the joint article published in The Foreign Affairs, by Abbas Kadima and Lay Al-khateeb.<sup>18</sup>In the first entry of this article, they have attributed the Syrian conflict to be a manifestation of the weakness in the U.S' coalition in the region acclaiming that the coalition's members do not share a common enemy in Syria. Russia supports Al-Assad, Iran supports Russia in this task; U.S supports the moderate opposition while some regional players such as Qatar, SA, Turkey consider others to their fore. With whatever strategy objectives and aspirations guiding the coalition, one aim should be to terminate the threat of terrorism from the region.

The first phase of this solution could be to counter Daesh in Iraq and Syria. The Second phase could involve a political settlement that may or may not accept Al-Assad to be a part of the solution. In the third phase the international community might organize a series of diplomatic partakes akin to Geneva 3 or a series of Vienna meetings to set the conditions fourth phase which could moreover address the humanitarian crisis and post -war rebuilding in Syria upon which a transitional government could find its role playing till the time a more politically induced infrastructure is guaranteed.

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<sup>18</sup>Abbas Kadhim, Luay Alkhateeb, "How to work With Russia In Syria", Foreign Affairs, 18 October 2015.  
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