

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

In the Middle East, Only Creative Diplomacy Can Prevail Over Cynicism ^[1]

DUBAI --- During two trips to the Middle East within the past two weeks, I have found nearly universal hopelessness about the situation in Syria and what it means for the larger region. Proposed peace talks are considered a sham, just a ploy to convince distant publics that their governments are “doing something.” No one thinks that Bashar Assad, as long as he is still breathing, will relinquish power in Syria. Everyone agrees that the slaughter will continue indefinitely.

More and more, the prevailing opinion seems to be that the United States and Israel are quietly delighted by what is going on within Syria. As one Arab observer put it: “Al Qaeda [part of the rebel forces] is killing Hezbollah [defenders of the regime], and Hezbollah is killing Al Qaeda. What could be better?” Asked about the death and displacement of civilians, he shrugged and said, “It is what always happens.”

Like a relentless cancer, the conflict is spreading, infecting Syria’s neighbors. One Arab newspaper headline early this week read, “Hezbollah, Syria Rebels Clash on Lebanese Soil.” The Lebanese with whom I spoke expect this fighting to expand into parts of Beirut as well as in border towns, as anti-Assad forces step up their attacks on Hezbollah. Iraqi troops have fired on Syrians. Jordan is trying to cope with a river of refugees. Turkey watches angrily. But if major powers see their strategic interests enhanced by “bad guys killing bad guys,” intervention – at a level that means something – is unlikely to happen.

The Lebanese civil war lasted 15 years and left behind a political system that remains precariously perched on the narrow line dividing order and anarchy. That may be Syria’s future: de facto division of the country along sectarian lines, with plenty of people willing to behave in ways that will ignite another round of chaos. Even to reach that point will take more months of mass suffering while the world watches.

The United States is inevitably a player in such affairs. It is probably providing more aid to the Syrian rebels than the public has been told, and it certainly has not discouraged Qatar, the rebels’ principal booster, from supplying money and arms, despite fears of indirectly assisting Al Qaeda fighters. After extracting America from two wars in the region, President Barack Obama has no desire to enter another one. As U.S. foreign policy more tightly embraces realism, the prospect of Hezbollah and Al Qaeda neutralizing each other, at least to some extent, trumps humanitarian concerns.

But what about long-term policy? Syria cannot be allowed to fester indefinitely. Even decimated Al Qaeda and Hezbollah forces will regenerate and resume their murderous ways. Further, the economies of states in the region, already unsettled by the uprisings of 2011, will need massive outside assistance if they are to be revived.

When one visits the region today, it is apparent that most members of the Arab public are

disgusted and exhausted by the incessant warfare that plagues so many of their communities. They want to find a path that will take them away from this kind of life. There is no surefire cure for disorder, but economic stability probably offers the best chance for this.

For the United States, contact with these publics, through public diplomacy focused on economic development, should be made a keystone of foreign policy toward this region. Once the fighting ends, or at least slows, a Marshall Plan for regional development, combined with micro projects such as tech camps and entrepreneurs' workshops, might provide relief from despair and offer incentives to redirect energies away from conflict. A future that includes prosperity and dignity is the best deterrent to extremism.

Beyond the American role, Arab states must do more to help their brethren. In a discussion with a member of the Saudi royal family about prospective U.S. military intervention in Syria, I asked, "Isn't it about time that the Arabs clean up their own mess?" The response was, "Of course," but no way to do so was suggested. Rich nations such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia have contributed billions of dollars to Egypt, Palestine, and others in the region (as well as to the factions of choice in Syria), but this usually occurs in an uncoordinated way. One of these states needs to assume a leadership role and design coherent policy for Arab development.

Meanwhile, while "bad guys kill bad guys," millions of innocents suffer. The United States and other Western nations seem to feel that their choice is to fight or to watch. Neither is acceptable, and so new efforts should be devoted to working more with public than with politicians and perhaps finding a better path to the future.
