

Assad unwilling to cede power when he has largely won

As the war enters its ninth winter, the urgency to end the country's agony has

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Ending war is a labyrinthine process. In the 17th century, the treaty of Westphalia that stopped the Thirty Years' War in Central Europe took four tortured years. Despite attempts at peace, it is estimated that 85 per cent of wars end by military victory. So heads of countries sitting down, conceding pieces of land and trying to write a new constitution between enemies while fighting is still going on almost always ends in failure. And when the winning side doesn't want to concede anything, peace is impossible.

Peacemaking at best is about accepting standards that are lower than expected. Batna – or the best alternative to a negotiated agreement – is academic speak for what to do when negotiations fail. The acronym says it all. Alternatives need to be employed.

In Syria, attempts to end a war which has destroyed ancient Silk Road cities and claimed the lives of untold civilians – the UN stopped counting the dead in 2014 – are ongoing. Something needs to shift before the start of another disastrous winter. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says the death toll since the start of the war has topped 511,000. In addition, 6.6 million people have been displaced internally and 5.6m around the world, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Last week, a second round of Syrian talks ended in Geneva. These UN-brokered talks were meant to be the start of a long road of political rapprochement followed by elections but they ended without a consensus and without a meeting of the group of 45 delegates meant to be negotiating on the constitution.

The 150-member committee composed of three varied groups – opposition, regime and civil society – was meant to usher in a new phase of diplomacy, an attempt to once again end the war. It was meant to amend Syria's constitution.

It was never going to be perfect but the talks were all we had to end the war. The result last week was to be expected. According to sources, the government delegation failed to present its own agenda and tried to shift the discussion away from the constitutional reforms.

Whose fault is it? The regime appears to be hampering the process. It doesn't want to be there. Its ally Russia urged it to be there, but the regime is bent on doing everything it can to destroy any attempt at peace. Opposition members say they proposed a working plan in good faith to address the general structure of the constitution and its chapters. They apparently suggested discussing the leading principles of the constitution.

The regime shot them down. "Since the beginning of the second round, we made five proposals



A street in Douma near Damascus devastated by the Syria war.

within the scope of the constitutional committee and its authorities. All five were rejected by the regime. We will continue to present new proposals in order to find a solution," Hadi Alabahra, co-chair of the opposition side on the committee said last week.

In October when the talks started, all three sides were meant to work on "solid, initial discussions and commonalities to build", according to Geir Pedersen, the UN's special envoy for Syria. But solid was the last word to describe talks where one side was completely in-

tractable. On Friday, Mr Pedersen said, "disagreement is typical in such cases".

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But there is a major thorn in the side of any talks. The co-chair from the regime side, Ahmad Kuzbari, has always said there must be national constancy – that is, that the

Assad regime

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Iranian regime's priority is ensuring

Tehran is banking on Lebanese protesters running out of steam while at home and in I

Raghida Dergham

Iranian leaders and their allies are counting on stamina to weather the storm and are hoping demonstrators' energy and fervour will wane as the year draws to a close. In Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, the Iranian regime's priority is securing its survival and preventing the three uprisings from bearing fruit by any means necessary – whatever the cost.

Russia remains committed to its Iranian ally and is confident of its promise to stop the spread of instability. What is new is the shift in the European position with regards to Iran. The Europeans have run out of patience with Iran's violations, not just in terms of the 2015 nuclear deal but also the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' direct participation in staging riots, and stoking sectarianism and violence against peaceful protests in Lebanon, from its outposts in Syria and the Bekaa Valley.

This has made countries like Germany draw closer to the US position, despite previous opposition, causing concern and anger among the ranks of the Iranian leadership. A few days ago, German daily Der

Spiegel reported that the nation's interior ministry had requested an inquiry into Hezbollah's activities, with an agreement reached by the government in Berlin to impose a total ban on the organisation in Germany next week. The report said Germany would treat members of Hezbollah members as it treats ISIS.

For 18 months, US ambassador to Berlin Richard Grenell sought to persuade European states to adopt the American perspective on Iranian and Hezbollah activities; the new policy in Germany bears his hallmarks. Iran will undoubtedly be furious. The leadership in Tehran spared no effort in convincing the Europeans to push for exemptions from US sanctions but has since been steadily let down as European banks and businesses refused to deal with the regime, fearing they too would be sanctioned.

The Iranians have used a combination of blackmail and threats, and a pattern of escalation and de-escalation, aware that a US-European alliance would further increase their isolation. Meanwhile, as protests rage on home turf, sources say the regime in Tehran is determined to reject any dialogue with



Hezbollah's activities could be banned across Europe.

demonstrators. Iran's leaders are convinced the protests in Lebanon will die down in a matter of weeks. In short, Iran has decided to take a rigid, escalatory and uncompromising approach.

The Europeans are concerned about a possible Iranian assault of the level and magnitude of the

attack on Saudi Aramco facilities. They are also concerned about Iran clamping down on demonstrations at home and dragging the Lebanese uprising into violence by engineering chaos that would consolidate Hezbollah's control of the country. Such actions would inevitably impact relations.

Berlin is resentful of Iranian threats and blackmails against Germany, France and Britain, all signatories of the nuclear deal. The German government believes the time has come to publicly call out Iranian violations of the deal instead of continuing to try to salvage it. After US President Donald

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