

Bosnia's Lessons for Syria



Despite the last-minute diplomatic row over the cancellation of the United Nations' invitation to Iran, the "Geneva II" peace talks between the government of Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian opposition are scheduled to start today (Jan. 22), with support from NATO members and Russia. But the process faces daunting challenges

What is the likelihood of the Assad regime's negotiating its own departure, given its improved military position? And to what extent can opposition representatives act for the fragmented, even rival, forces fighting in Syria? Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, many observers have drawn parallels between Syria and Bosnia. The Geneva II talks echo efforts to resolve the conflict in the Balkans 20 years ago. What are the lessons? If there is a gen-

By Philippe Leroux-Martin
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extraordinarily resistant to outside intervention. This has three important implications. The first is that peace initiatives are often an unreliable lens through which to view a conflict. There is a tendency to assume that facts on the ground in places like Bosnia or Syria are primarily controlled by strategies and timetables devised by foreigners. They are

initiatives; the conflict in Syria has already generated its share.

Equally crucial is that we ask how our own efforts may interfere with conflict. In Bosnia in 1993, the effect of the unsuccessful Vance-Owen Peace Plan, which proposed new political entities divided along ethnic lines, was to intensify campaigns of ethnic cleansing as warring groups tried to strengthen their positions ahead of partition. We should expect plans discussed in

Diplomacy and the Syrian Equation

Regarding "Bosnia's lessons for Syria" (Opinion, Jan. 22) by Philippe Leroux-Martin: There are certainly lessons to be learned from Bosnia for Syria. Alas, it seems few if any have been heeded. It was not simply Richard C. Holbrooke's "diplomatic surge" that led to the Dayton peace talks: a NATO bombing campaign and a combined Bosnian-Croatian Army offensive were instrumental in creating the right frame of mind for the Bosnian Serbs and Serbia. For the first time, the Bosnian Serbs were losing - posing a threat to Slobodan Milosevic's rule should their lines break and forcing a wave of refugees toward Serbia, which occurred in August 1995 during Croatia's Operation Storm. This is no knock on diplomacy, but it contextualizes the environment in which it could succeed.

By Kurt Bassuener

There is no parallel to the Geneva II talks. As recently as a year ago, Western military intervention - specifically striking Bashar al-Assad's air force and columns of ground forces on the major roads between fronts - could have created a parallel dynamic by limiting the overstretched Syrian Army's mobility and fighting effectiveness. Now, due to the Obama administration's unwillingness to act, the correlation of forces has shifted, making such an application of force less likely to achieve the desired result of forcing Mr. Assad from power or into negotiations from a position of weakness. Less savory opposition actors have also proliferated in the intervening year, also as a result of nonintervention. Mr. Leroux-Martin mentions the Serbian and Croatian roles at

Dayton. Yet Mr. Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman represented Bosnia's Serbs and Croats at the negotiations because they were effectively co-belligerents who could literally call the shots with their local allies. No external power exerts a parallel weight in Syria, though there is no doubt that Russia, Iran and the Gulf states have influence in the war. I agree completely that diplomacy is effective in shaping "future behavior through electoral and constitutional engineering." This is why I pray that the Syrians don't get saddled with a power-sharing deal anything like Dayton, which has preserved oligarchical warlord politics in Bosnia, albeit with a democratic veneer. Yet absent the willingness to affect the dynamic on the ground in Syria through direct application of force, that is probably the best Syrians can hope for.

eral one from Bosnia for the parties meeting in Switzerland, it is the need for humility. As determined as the international community may be to resolve conflict, civil war is

not. Conflict is embedded in the environment; peace plans come and go. The Dayton Accords that ended fighting in Bosnia in 1995 were preceded by four fruitless peace

Switzerland to have a similar impact in Syria. This may be unavoidable, but we may be able to predict how the pattern of violence will evolve and allocate resources