

Colloguy
On Syria,
the U.S. has failed
to take a leadership role | **Martin**
S. Indyk*

** Ambassador Martin Sean Indyk is U.S. special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. He is currently on leave from his position as Vice President and Director for Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington. During the Clinton administration Indyk served as U.S. ambassador to Israel, assistant secretary of state for Near East affairs, and as special assistant to the president and senior director for Near East and South Asia on the U.S. National Security Council. Indyk is the author of *Innocent Abroad: An Intimate Account of American Peacemaking Diplomacy in the Middle East*, and most recently, *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy* (with Michael O'Hanlon and Kenneth Lieberthal).*

With Syria in ruins and no effective international diplomatic effort to halt the increasing bloodshed in the now war-torn country, criticisms of the United States for failing to live up to its leadership commitments are getting louder.

Martin Indyk was recently appointed by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry as the U.S. Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations, tasked with supervising the fragile peace talks between Israel and Palestine. He talks here about the significant role of the U.S. in maintaining peace and order in the Middle East, lamenting Washington's unwillingness to take tangible steps in getting rid of Syria's embattled President Bashar al-Assad. He urges Washington to increase U.S. involvement in Middle East affairs. This interview took place right before his appointment as a senior American envoy to the Middle East.

"The situation in Syria is heartbreaking," Indyk said. "It bothers me a great deal that the United States is not more actively involved on the ground trying to help the Syrian opposition."

Indyk's unhappiness with the situation highlights the limited role the U.S. has undertaken since the beginning of the war in Syria, which has left more than 100,000 dead and millions displaced.

Ironically, the stakes have changed in the favor of the Syrian regime since the use of chemical weapons in Da-

Indyk criticized the U.S. for failing to declare a clear objective, such as calling on Assad to leave office as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did.

mascus suburb on August 21, and forces loyal to Assad have been gaining ground in the war that has spread across the country. Assad's government is skillfully exploiting infighting and discord within the opposition; its recent gains on the ground can also be attributed to shrinking international assistance to the rebels fighting to topple the regime in Damascus.

Western concerns over the growing numbers of Islamist extremists who have gained a considerable foothold in the conflict over the past year have fuelled fears that the U.S. and allies of the Syrian opposition will refuse to get involved in a civil war that is becoming a quagmire.

Indyk criticized the U.S. for failing to declare a clear objective, such as calling on Assad to leave office as Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did. He added that Washington has not found the "collective will" to make that happen and to achieve a clear policy directive.

Indyk noted that the conflict in Syria has become a real tragedy on multiple dimensions. On the humanitarian dimension, he said, so many people have been killed – the death toll is even higher than in Libya, where the

To Indyk, the two-year war in Syria has reinforced a perspective that the U.S. has both a strategic and a humanitarian interest in helping the opposition to achieve freedom for Syria.

international community did intervene.

In a bid to make a case for more U.S. involvement, Indyk argued that the Syrian state is now failing, and the country is starting to be torn apart. Recalling the fact that the use of chemical weapons has been independently verified, he warned against the “strategic consequences” of the intervention of Iran and Hezbollah with thousands of Lebanese Shiite militia crossing the border from Lebanon into Syria.

Syria, he said, sits at the heart in the Middle East, surrounded by allies of the U.S. – Jordan, Turkey and Israel. “We don’t have closer allies [than these countries] and all of them are affected by this descent into chaos,” Indyk emphasized.

To Indyk, the two-year war in Syria has reinforced a perspective that the U.S. has both a strategic and a humanitarian interest in helping the opposition to achieve freedom for Syria.

Recent diplomatic overtures between Russia and the U.S. have frustrated rebels fighting on the ground and the exiled Syrian opposition. Weeks after

the deployment of chemical weapons in the Damascus suburb, U.S. President Barack Obama decided to pursue a diplomatic path in the hope of disarming Syria of its chemical weapons, neither denied nor confirmed by Damascus for a lengthy period.

On August 21, according to U.S. intelligence reports, more than 1,500 people, nearly one third of them children, were killed as a result of a chemical weapons attack in a rebel-held territory. The U.S. threatened the use force to punish of Damascus, but later Washington backed down following a Russian-brokered chemical weapons deal. Assad’s chemical arsenal, in line with the agreement, should be completely eradicated by mid-2014.

The Syrian opposition hoped that the joint French-U.S. military strikes on more than 50 military targets in and around Damascus would tip the balance against Assad’s military, which enjoys air superiority and is capable of striking any point across the country. But the opposition also interpreted a diplomatic deal between the U.S. and Russia as a green light to Assad to continue killing by conventional weapons. As long as Assad does not deploy chemical weapons, the Western world will stand idly by, watching as the country is destroyed.

In addition to growing frustration with the existence of radical groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, the flow of weapons through Turkey has also dried up in recent months. Ankara

has made it clear that it is not backing radical groups in its southern neighbor, and that it is under tremendous pressure by the West to carefully vet arms deliveries into Syria, and ensure that they don't end up in the hands of al-Qaeda affiliates.

Indyk noted that the way to find an enduring solution to the crisis in Syria is "clear-cut even though it is very difficult." He believes there must be a political framework under an international umbrella of legitimacy in support of intervention by the U.S., Turkey, Jordan and other Western powers. That effort, he said, has been hindered by the Russian veto in the United Nations Security Council. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was, in Indyk's words, "absolutely right" to try to bring the Russians into the process. He urged the Obama administration to continue with the effort to get Russians on board, although it is proving very difficult to get Moscow's cooperation.

In the end, he stated, all of the available options are all bad, but things will be a little better if "the Russians [are] involved in the effort to arrange a post-Assad transition."

One risk of trying to resolve the conflict around a negotiating table is that the Syrian regime will have the upper hand due to recent gains by Damascus on the ground.

So far, the exiled Syrian opposition and the Syrian government have

Indyk noted that the way to find an enduring solution to the crisis in Syria is "clear-cut even though it is very difficult."

promised that they will attend peace talks in Geneva, as long hoped by the world community, particularly the U.S. and Russia. It is still unclear when the conference will start, and it has already been delayed several times.

The Western-backed Syrian opposition in exile is dragging its feet despite Western pressure to participate. They have little support among rebels fighting to oust Assad on the ground, mainly because of years of infighting and political bickering within the group. The Syrian opposition has set several conditions for its participation in the conference. It demands Assad's unconditional exit and rejects the idea that the Syrian president will be included in an interim government, which is expected to supervise the political transition.

Damascus, however, rejects any demand that Assad should leave.

Thanks to its superiority in the air, the Assad regime's air bombardment has gained the army important advances in Damascus suburbs and reinforced Assad's position in northern Aleppo, Syria's largest city and a financial hub.

The rebel fighters need to be provided with arms to counter the imbalance created by the fact that the Syrian regime has aircraft, helicopters and heavy artillery.

In Indyk's view, the second dimension of the solution to the Syrian crisis has to be the help on the ground for the resistance fighters affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). He said that by now, the U.S. and Turkey know who they are, referring to the fact that weapons supplied to the rebel fighters could end up in the hands of radical groups. The rebel fighters need to be provided with arms to counter the imbalance created by the fact that the Syrian regime has aircraft, helicopters and heavy artillery. "There are ways of countering that," he said, but without elaborating.

As a third dimension, he proposed a no-fly zone to protect the areas that are liberated from Assad's grip. In his opinion, that can be achieved without great deal of difficulty, although the Pentagon says it would more difficult than in Libya.

Indyk recalled that the U.S. ran a no-fly zone in northern Iraq with a squadron of US air force operating out of the Incirli air base in southern Turkey for ten years to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussein. "We never lost a pilot ... well, we didn't destroy all of Saddam Hussein's air force but

whenever we were challenged, we challenged them; we just took care of business," he said.

He said that the Patriot air defense missile systems in Jordan and Turkey could help to establish a no-fly zone in northern and southeastern Syria, but that the U.S. has to deploy air patrols and handle the challenges posed by Assad's air force.

Indyk recalled that the U.S. ran a no-fly zone in northern Iraq with a squadron of U.S. air force operating out of the Incirli air base in southern Turkey for ten years to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussein.

He also dismissed the idea that the Syrian air defense system is too sophisticated for the U.S. air force to handle. He recalled several Israeli air raids in Syria; the Israeli air force seems to have no trouble in bombing Syrian targets. "Whether there is a will, there is a way. What is lacking at the moment is the will."

He said that bringing an end to the Syrian crisis is increasingly urgent. First, because of the terrible human tragedies as a result of the war, which has now been going on for nearly three years of war; and also because the situation on the ground is turning against the opposition as a result of interventions by Iran and Hezbollah.

He urged the U.S. and Turkey not to just stand by while the conflict in Syria unfolds – a conflict which has “dramatic ramifications for Turkey’s security and for the security of the U.S. allies.”

“So we have to move quickly. It is an urgent priority,” he added.

Iran’s bid for dominance

On Iran, Indyk suggests that the U.S. has done little to contain Iran, which has for some years making a bid for dominance in the region. He stressed that Tehran has made some considerable advances essentially because the U.S. has been unwilling to stand up to it in Iraq. He suggested that Washington did Iran a huge favor by removing its two most troublesome adversaries. On its eastern border, he said, the U.S. removed the Taliban and to the west, Saddam Hussein.

“So we gave the Iranians a great a boost in their bid for dominance –

On Iran, Indyk suggests that the U.S. has done little to contain Iran, which has for some years making a bid for dominance in the region.

courtesy of U.S. taxpayers. And then we pleaded no contest in Baghdad so they in effect established their influence in Baghdad and southern Iraq,” he added.

He pointed Syria as a jumping off point for Iran for their bid to control Lebanon and to become active in Palestinian arena via Hamas. On Syria, however, he said that Iran has suffered a blow as a result of the conflict. He was referring to their unconditional support of Assad while tens of thousands of people were killed in the conflict. In this regard, he said the steadfast support for Assad has seriously undermined the claim that Iran originally presented to the Arabs, i.e. that they were promoting the anti-American cause in the region. Indyk posited that Iran’s intervention on the side of the minority Alawite regime has turned the conflict into a sectarian battle, which is not to Iran’s advantage.

“They cannot dominate the Sunni Arab world by fighting the Sunni Arab world,” he said, adding that Iran will lose that battle, by getting bogged down in Syria, and will thereby suffer a real setback.

But if Tehran succeeds in preventing Assad’s downfall and reestablishing control for the Syrian regime, then it is going to be a big problem for Turkey, Jordan and Israel. “And I say that because the U.S. is in many ways moving offshore. It is redefining its interests in the region. In many ways Obama is no longer interested in playing a Great Game.”

Indyk stated that Obama is planning for an end to U.S. involvement in the Greater Middle East today and that he

But if Tehran succeeds in preventing Assad's downfall and reestablishing control for the Syrian regime, then it is going to be a big problem for Turkey, Jordan and Israel.

clearly doesn't want to get involved in another war in Syria. He said the U.S. is much more interested in Asia, referring to Obama's "Asia Pivot" policy, introduced last year.

He said the offshore balancing policy is not designed to leave a vacuum but to depend on "our local allies to protect their common interests." In Libya, he provided as an example, they called it "Leading From Behind." He said he would prefer the U.S. to take a leadership role in the region instead of putting the burden on allies as offshore balancing suggests.

Indyk thinks that Obama has a different approach in mind, which is to depend on other allies and to help them tackle challenges they face in the troubled region.

Indyk thinks that Obama has a different approach in mind, which is to depend on other allies and to help them tackle challenges they face in the troubled region. He named these allies as Turkey, Jordan and Israel, considering an apology from Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as "important," in trying to put the strategic relationship between Turkey and Israel "back on track."

From an American perspective, Indyk noted, if one follows the logic, an Israeli apology to Turkey is an essential part of the U.S. Middle East policy.

"If we are depending on Israel and Turkey as our most capable allies in the region, we need them to be working [together], at least not fighting each other. But that is easier said than done when it comes to Syria," he said, adding that Turkey has very good reasons to be reluctant to engage in the war in its southern neighbor. Speaking on the U.S. policy to arm the Syrian rebels, Indyk said the administration may be at a point where the Syrian policy changes in terms of tactics. "We may see a tactical change, the situation on the ground is deteriorating; but we may not see a change in the overall strategy."

He underlined that this overall strategy is to pivot to Asia and leave the region in the "hands of our allies."

Indyk avoided criticizing Turkey's foreign policy outright: "Let's say that they haven't succeeded yet." He reiterated that it is a very difficult region, littered with failed efforts, and that "the number one candidate for this is the U.S."

It is very easy, he pointed out, to label policies as failures when it comes to the Middle East. “What is important is to try,” Indyk said, adding that Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu deserves credit for trying.

“So I would not rush to criticism. John Kerry is now trying to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I don’t know anybody in the region who thinks he can succeed. The Israeli and Palestinian leadership can play games to avoid blame for the failure. But [Kerry] is trying and God bless him, and I hope he will succeed. Again, I wish the Palestinian problem will find resolution. And as everybody is saying, the ones who

“What is important is to try,” Indyk said, adding that Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu deserves credit for trying.

will suffer are the people who are living in the region. Starting with Turkey, in the case of Palestinians, it is Israel. Diplomacy is extraordinarily difficult as a means of resolving conflicts in the region. The region seems to prefer use of force. As Winston Churchill once said, “jaw-jaw” better than “war-war.”

Indyk remarked that he is so conscious of U.S. government’s mistakes that he hesitates to criticize others’ mistakes.

I personally invested a huge amount of effort in trying to make peace between Israel and Palestinians. We had a policy, I was a major advocate, forget about Dual Containment.

“It is simply in the nature of the game, we invested. I personally invested a huge amount of effort in trying to make peace between Israel and Palestinians. We had a policy, I was a major advocate, forget about Dual Containment. Syria first – It is policy that I advocated for. President Clinton agreed with me. Everybody was saying ‘Palestinians... Palestinians...’ but we were chasing Syria, [Hafez] Assad the father. Were we naive? I guess so, but it was better than not trying, I don’t regret the effort we made. We made super effort to try to get Assad to act in the interest of Syria.”

The Dual Containment to which Indyk was referring to is one of the most criticized Clinton-era policies. It suggested that the U.S. should check Iran and Iraq together instead of allowing Iraq to contain Iran.

“Dual containment was only one branch of the strategy not the strategy itself,” said Indyk in defence of the policy. He said that the Dual Containment policy failed because it was designed to contain Iran and Iraq while the U.S. secured peace between Israel and Palestinians.

“The failure of dual containment is more to do with the failure to achieve a comprehensive peace that it is to containing these two rogues. That was a different time.”

“The failure of dual containment is more to do with the failure to achieve a comprehensive peace that it is to containing these two rogues. That was a different time,” he added. He noted that before one can condemn a policy as having failed, there is a responsibility to offer an alternative that could have succeeded.

Indyk was critical of Russia’s resurgence and comeback in the Middle East. “What does Russia have to offer the region?” Indyk asked. “Arms, fuelling conflicts, going back to the old Soviet days,” he answered. He questioned whether Moscow has a positive constructive vision for the region; a region in conflict can always be exploited.

“Russia is a player at the moment because, essentially, the U.S. is not prepared to play a Great Game.” Indyk adding that in this age, the strategic importance of the Middle East is being redefined: the U.S. development of energy independence means that it is no longer going to depend on the Middle East oil, which is a “huge strategic shift”.

“That doesn’t mean that our allies will not depend on the Middle East

securing free flow of oil from the region. [Our allies] are not going to go to land wars in Greater Middle East. I can imagine what can happen in a decade. If Russia wants to take advantage of that, it should use models that are attractive to the people in the region. And both Turkey and U.S. have learnt that it is thankless task to try to build a position in the region,” Indyk concluded.

Colloquy conducted by Mahir Zeynalov, Managing Editor of CI, October 2013, Istanbul, Turkey