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From: Anne-Marie Slaughter [REDACTED]
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Cc: Abedin, Huma; Cheryl Mills; Jacob J Sullivan (SullivanJJ@state.gov)
Subject: Michael Young, editor of the Daily Star, on Syria and a possible diplomatic strategy

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Prepare for the long haul in Syria May 10, 2012 01:08 AM (Last updated: May 10, 2012 09:29 AM) By Michael Young

The Daily Star

One thing that the Lebanese can usually do with some precision is predict stalemate. Their own conflict between 1975 and 1990 was one long, debilitating lesson in destructive deadlock. So when those in Beirut look toward Syria today and shake their heads, that's because they can hear echoes of their own past predicament.

Among those shaking their heads are lucid Syrian allies who will mock the propensity of some of their comrades to insist that victory for President Bashar Assad is just around the corner. This gloom is shared by Kofi Annan, the U.N.-Arab League envoy. This week he lamented that violence in Syria remained at "unacceptable levels," while insisting that the observer mission he has put together "is the only remaining chance to stabilize the country."

Annan has a plan, and because it's the only plan in circulation everyone in the international community is clinging to it. And yet you will not find two people who truly believe that the deployment of United Nations monitors will slow the leviathan of civil war in Syria.

One reason is that Annan's scheme pursues incompatible objectives. On the one side the envoy wants to contain the death and destruction, bringing it down to (well, the implication is his) "acceptable levels." This Annan seeks to do through an all-inclusive dialogue between different Syrian political forces, regime and opposition. On the other side, however, he wants to facilitate the relatively peaceful overthrow of the Assad leadership, by creating conditions allowing for unhampered anti-regime protests.

The Syrian president is no dope. He won't implement those features of Annan's plan that might undermine his authority. As for the opposition, it has no intention of embracing dialogue unless this leads to Assad's departure, and unless it receives assurances that the regime will halt its brutality. The envoy is perhaps still hoping against hope that Russia's government will decisively shift on Syria and compel Bashar Assad to become more conciliatory. However, that's not likely.

The Russians are ensnared in a knot of their own making. Their support is, indeed, essential for Assad's survival. However, Moscow is so disinclined to surrender that singular leverage that its diplomatic flexibility has effectively been neutralized. Assad has the Russians' measure. They cannot readily give up on him, because that would mean forfeiting their strongest card and caving in to the Americans at the Security Council. Russia has become an agent of the status quo, regardless of its assurances to Annan that it is not committed in principle to the perpetuation of Assad rule.

The charade will persist. Annan, to protect his plan, will continue to suggest that Russia might succeed in pressing for a change in Assad's behavior. The Russians, who don't want to see the envoy's proposals abandoned, since that would leave a vacuum and only highlight Moscow's ineffectiveness, will continue to hint that they can deliver a breakthrough. Everyone else, the United States above all, will wait and see. No one wants to be held responsible for a void in Syria, and no one has an alternative to Annan's project.

Therefore, the diplomatic movement is mostly meaningless. As we saw in Lebanon more than three decades ago, political initiatives can take on a life of their own, and similar to the limbs of spiders continue to twitch even after death. Syrians, like the Lebanese before them, expect almost nothing from the international community. We are in a logic of chronic civil conflict in Syria, with the revolt taking on the dimension of a guerrilla war, bolstered by endemic and systemic recalcitrance in many cities and towns. How does one walk back from the precipice?

There are those arriving from Syria who will point out that the situation is not as bad as media outlets say. But they are missing the forest for the trees. The contract of fear hitherto imposed by the Assads has collapsed, taking with it a second contract that held up their political system: a sense that the regime, for all its faults, stood at the nexus point of multiple interests in Syrian society.

What most Syrians can see at present is that the ruling family is fighting for itself and its community, and that it will never be able to glue the pieces back together again. At best an improbable triumph would have to be reinforced by years of ferocious intimidation, in the context of a disintegrating economy, in a society devoid of cross-sectarian cohesion and solidarity. Assad has neither the skills nor the wherewithal to rebuild his legitimacy, and as his late father well understood, a minority regime with no national legitimacy cannot long endure.

We're not quite at the stage where Syria has institutionalized a civil war. But we're nearly there, and the prospective political and military dynamics are not liable to derail such a terrible outcome. The diplomatic impasse will only encourage outside countries to arm the rebels. Assad and the criminal enterprise he leads will not cease their repression, because that would spell their end. This was obvious a year ago when the Syrian uprising began, and yet the international community did nothing. Now we have a colossal mess to clean up.

Michael Young is opinion editor of THE DAILY STAR. He tweets @BeirutCalling.

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Anne-Marie Slaughter
Bert G. Kerstetter '66 University Professor of Politics and International Affairs
Princeton University
440 Robertson Hall
Princeton, NJ 08544

Assistant: Terry Murphy
Website: www.princeton.edu/~slaughtr

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