

Has Kofi Annan Failed in Syria?

Written by Michael Aaronson

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MICHAEL AARONSON, MAY 30 2012

This might appear to be a naive question. The cold-blooded execution on 25 May in the town of Houla of over 100 civilians, including women and children, followed by the discovery on 30 May in Deir Ezzor of 13 bodies with their hands tied, some shot in the head, are but the latest examples of the atrocities committed against civilians in the Syrian crisis. Leaving aside the inevitable claim and counterclaim as to who was responsible for these outrages (although the UN's 27 May Press Statement condemning the killings in Houla points the finger squarely at the Assad regime) it is clear that the relevant provisions of the "Annan Plan" (ceasefire, withdrawal of forces, guaranteed humanitarian access, and protection of civilians) have not come about. Even Kofi Annan himself, while striving to retain his neutrality as an impartial mediator, has warned that Syria is at a "tipping point", while the increased incidence of explosions in and around Damascus and other violence across the country seems to presage Syria's slide into civil war.

So one can see why some would argue that the Annan plan has failed. However, it is important to retain a realistic perspective about how much a third-party mediator can hope to achieve, particularly when he or she is appointed in circumstances such as those faced by Annan. From the start of the Syrian crisis in March 2011 the UN Security Council has been divided over how to deal with it. This came to a head in February of this year when Russia and China vetoed a Resolution calling for the Syrian President to step down and this was described as "disgusting and shameful" by the US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice. The subsequent face-saving compromise was a joint appointment by the UN and the Arab League of Kofi Annan as the Special Envoy to the Syrian crisis. Annan's first task, therefore, was to mediate, not between the Syrian regime and its opponents, but between the P5 members in the Security Council. He made it clear that if he were to succeed there could only be one effective mediation process and that all members of the UN needed to put their weight behind it. Only subsequently was he able to turn his attention to trying to establish common ground between the warring parties in Syria.

Again, it is important to understand that this is all a mediator can do: to help people who are unable or unwilling to talk to each other to see the advantages of doing so. The true extent of the mediator's power is very dependent on the specific context. For example, when in early 2008 Annan was asked to intervene to help stop the violence threatening to drag Kenya into civil war following the contested presidential elections he was able to play a forceful role knowing that he had the full weight of the African Union, UN, and key donor governments behind him. In Syria four years later this unreserved international support has been denied him, despite his tireless diplomacy taking in visits to Moscow and Beijing as well as Arab capitals. The continuing role of the US-led and anti-regime "Friends of Syria" group, alongside unwavering Russian support for Assad, has undoubtedly complicated his task. In addition he has had to deal with a fragmented and much weaker opposition within Syria, compared to Kenya where he was mediating between two well matched opponents, neither of whom could reasonably hope to win if the violence continued unabated.

When the Annan mission started many poured scorn on it, asking how anyone could trust the Syrian Government to keep any promises it might make. It was claimed that a mediation process merely gave the regime a legitimacy it had long since ceased to merit. Again, subsequent events might suggest this scepticism was justified, but the harsh reality is that there was no other obvious strategy available. Encouraged by Russian and Chinese acquiescence over Libya, from the start of the crisis the US, UK, and France took an uncompromising stance with the Syrian government, from which they were eventually obliged to make a humiliating retreat. When the history of the Syrian

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crisis is written historians may suggest that had mediation being attempted much earlier – before the disaccord in the Security Council became so pernicious – it might have succeeded. When it did eventually come about it still offered a remote prospect of securing a halt to the fighting and the beginnings of an inclusive political process. Better to support that, surely, than to continue to shout ineffectually from the sidelines. In the absence of US willingness to mount a coercive military intervention – or of Russian willingness to persuade Assad that enough is enough and that he should step down – mediation may still be the only game in town.

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Professor Sir Michael Aaronson was Director General (chief executive) of Save the Children UK from 1995-2005, and from 1988-1995 was the charity's Overseas Director. He first joined Save the Children in 1969, spending two years as a relief worker in Nigeria after reading philosophy and psychology at St John's College, Oxford. Between 1972 and 1988 he held various posts in the UK Diplomatic Service, serving in London, Paris, Lagos, and Rangoon. He is a founder member, and from 2001-2008 was Chair of the Board, of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Geneva-based private foundation working to improve the international response to conflict, in particular through independent mediation. Since January 2004 he has been a Visiting Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. In September 2008 he was appointed an Honorary Visiting Professor and in May 2011 a Professorial Research Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Surrey, where he is also Co-Director of cii – the Centre for International Intervention. He is a Senior Adviser to NATO, working on the political/military aspects of NATO transformation, and is an occasional lecturer at the UK Defence Academy on civil/military collaboration in conflict situations.