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Kerry's Hypocrisy on Syria

Bob Dreyfuss

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The Montreux-to-Geneva peace conference is underway, and although the mainstream media is focusing on the negatives—namely, the fact that the invitation to Iran was blocked by the United States, and the confrontational exchange between Syria's foreign minister and the United Nations' Ban Ki-Moon—it's important to emphasize that diplomacy, not war, is the only way out of the Syrian crisis. Still, Secretary of State John Kerry was hypocritical in his denunciation of the government of Bashar al-Assad, glossing over the atrocities by the anti-Assad rebels and demonizing Assad. Hopefully, behind the scenes, Kerry's hard line on Syria will give way to a more serious effort to compromise in search of a solution.

Still, what's happening in Switzerland is critically important, and it reflects an important shift from war to diplomacy on the part of President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry. The start of the Geneva process on Syria—coming only months after Obama and Kerry seemed determined to bomb Syria—and the successful beginning of the Iran-P5+1 talks are signal events.

That said, all sides acknowledge that the Syrian civil war won't end anytime soon, and it will take enormous patience on all sides before there will be a resolution. The Syrian foreign minister, Walid Moallem, took a very hard line, too, as did the delegation representing the opposition. But some of that, at least, is for show, and it happened on the public stage. When the talks move from Montreux to Geneva on Friday, the real negotiations will take place, and the discussions will occur behind closed doors.

As Kerry said in a press conference following the first day of talks, it'll be a long, hard road. "No one should doubt, no one's trying to gloss this over, that this is the beginning of a tough and complicated process," he said. "It's no secret that getting to where we are now has, as I said, been difficult, and peace and stability will not arrive overnight. But it's important that this process is now in place. It is important that the government and the opposition will sit down over these next days. And we don't expect a sudden breakthrough."

Part of the reason no breakthrough is imminent is that the conflict between the Syrian government and the rebels is not the only one going on. Parallel to that is the conflict between the United States, which implacably demands that the government of Bashar al-Assad be ousted, and Russia, which says that there is no reason at the outset to exclude the possibility that Assad and his cohort would remain in place. On top of that, there is a regional conflict between Iran, which supports Assad, and Saudi Arabia, the chief backer of the opposition. If the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran can all agree on the outlines of a new Syrian political balance, then there's a chance that the peace talks can succeed. Unfortunately, in a shortsighted and self-defeating step, the United States and the Syrian rebels insisted that an invitation to Iran from the UN's Ban be rescinded, and it was.

In an exchange with Kim Ghattas of the BBC in Montreux, Kerry obfuscated on Iran, falling back on the US insistence that Iran should have agreed to preconditions calling for the ouster of the Assad government and the creation of a "transitional" authority. Here's the exchange between Ghattas and Kerry:

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for taking our questions. Iran was disinvented from this conference because Tehran did not endorse the Geneva communiqué. But then clearly, as we saw today, neither does the Syrian Government. Iran is almost as much a party to the conflict as the Syrian Government. Can you really expect to make progress in the negotiations without finding a way to involve Iran in the conversation at some point?

And as a follow-up, I've just spent a month in the region, and everybody I spoke to said that there is simply no way that things will get better, whether in Syria or in the region, if you don't get Iran and Saudi Arabia to talk to each other. How can you help facilitate that?

SECRETARY KERRY: Well, I'm not going to go into the details of it, but obviously, we're very aware of the need for a number of specific countries to be able to contribute to a solution rather than to be part of the problem.

With respect to Iran's participation formally in the conference, it was very clear what the standard was for participation. We never ever minced our words about that. We always said countries that want to support Geneva I, which since 2012 has been the framework—since June of 2012, that has been the framework for trying to resolve the problem of Syria. And country after country after country has signed up to Geneva I communiqué. So what you all need to do is ask yourselves why Iran won't sign up to it, not why they're not here. Why didn't they sign up to it? Why won't they agree as every other nation has that this is the method that even—I mean, the Russian Federation signed up to it and was here, and Russia has been a critical partner in helping to bring us this far.

So I believe that with Russia and other efforts—Saudi Arabia was here. Saudi Arabia wasn't going to be here, but they decided that it was important and they came. So I think that we have a critical mass building, and yes, Iran certainly does have an ability to be able to help make a difference. We hope that they would decide to be constructive and to make a decision to operate in a way going forward that can allow them to do so. There are plenty of ways that that door can be opened in the next weeks and months, and my hope is that they will want to join in a constructive solution.

It's good that Kerry is holding open the door to Iran's participation, but there's no reason Iran could not have attended the meeting today. And, in the rest of his press conference today, Kerry's rhetoric left something to be desired. While he slammed Assad—and the brutality of the government in Damascus, along with the recently revealed widespread torture of Syrian prisoners, deserves condemnation—he didn't condemn the suicide bombers, car bombers, torturers and assassins of the radical Islamist component of the opposition in equal terms, nor did he mention the mass executions carried out by the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the pro-Al Qaeda Nusra Front and the rebels of the Islamic Front coalition.

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Perhaps the worst moment in Kerry's press conference came when he tried to explain the origin of the civil war in 2011:

What happened in Syria began in the wake of a transformation that began to break out throughout the Middle East, throughout the Maghreb and the Middle East. And everybody knows the events that began in Libya and in Tunisia and Egypt. Eventually, young people in Syria stood up for change and some young kids with graffiti cans were arrested. When their parents came out to protest the arrest of their young children, 120 of them were killed.

That's the beginning of this. Not a religious revolution, not terrorists. No terrorists were there then. This was people looking for change peacefully in their country, and they were met by bullets and violence and death.

First of all, it's true that back in 2011, peaceful protesters in Syria were met with bullets. But that's when President Obama made a huge blunder, calling for the ouster of Assad. Had Obama refrained from that step, had the United States back in 2011 sought to calm passions on all side, had the United States quietly contacted Russia then, had Washington sought to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia into dialogue then, perhaps the situation would not have escalated into war. But, by demanding Assad's head on a platter, Obama accelerated the rebellion, throwing gas on the fire, and at the same time gave a green light to the Persian Gulf kleptocracies, led by Saudi Arabia, to provide cash and arms to the spreading rebellion.

In addition, Mr. Kerry: in 2013 the Egyptian government gunned down far more than 120 people in violently suppressing peaceful demonstrations by the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo and elsewhere. But Obama hasn't called for General Sisi, the Egyptian coup d'état leader, to quit. If that isn't a double standard, then I don't know what is.