Is There a Diplomatic Solution to the Syrian Crises

Is there a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crises and if so what is it? How do we prevent 1,000 people being killed a week in that country? What is our responsibility as a people and as a nation to prevent the genocide that is happening?

Thirty five people at the Friends Meeting House grappled with these questions as we heard members of the Syrian community talk about what is happening in their country. Laila Al-Soulaiman, a Pitt student of Syrian descent gave an excellent presentation on the Syrian situation. She spoke about the history of the present conflict, which has roots in the colonial period. This created a situation in which a minority, the Ba'ath Party, rule the majority of Syrians. President Bashar Hafez al-Assad inherited the presidency from his father and at first it was thought he would be a reformer. However, during his regime we have seen horrendous abuse of the civilian population.

The revolution in Syria started as a nonviolent movement just like the other Arab Spring movements. The government made some conciliatory gestures, but also used force to try to break up the protests, including laying siege to the city of Daraa, and destroyed civilian areas by bombing them. After two years of conflict as many as 100,000 people have died, out of a population of 22 million. Approximately 6.25 million have been displaced. Four million children have been impacted by this war, either killed or orphaned.

The international community has been largely ineffective in stopping the violence. In the case of Libya because of the large oil reserves the US had a strategic interest in bringing down Gaddafi. In Syria they have no such stakes and have done little to prevent the horrendous violence the Syrian people are seeing. There have been some calls for Assad’s removal and a failed resolution at the UN but little in the way of diplomatic attempts to bring a resolution to this conflict. Meanwhile the Russians have a definite stake in keeping Assad in power. Not only is one of their major naval bases is at Tartus on the Syrian coast but they are the main supplier of arms to the Syrian army.

The present attempt at diplomacy between the US and Russia to persuade Syria to give up its chemical weapons is certainly welcome. However it leaves those opposing the Assad regime no better off than before. People are still dying and being forced to leave their homes. And there are real questions about if he will comply and actually give up his chemical weapons. If the Syrian Government does give up its chemical weapons will anything further be done or will the international community go back to just standing by? If it doesn’t give up its chemical weapons what happens next? Will the US use air strikes against Syria? I think even most Syrians are leery of this scenario and the aftermath. Certainly there is no appetite in the US even for limited intervention.

Unless diplomacy is taken further and involves other key players such as Iran nothing much will change. We in peace community owe it to the Syrian people to do everything we can to persuade our Government to pursue a diplomatic solution that involves the United nations and all the parties.

 The American Friends Service Committee, (AFSC) is calling on our Government to take the following steps:

 The U.S. should immediately call for a comprehensive arms embargo on all parties to the conflict.

 Provide full support to the efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi, the joint United Nations/Arab League envoy, and to press for the rapid convening of a Geneva II conference. For those conferences to be meaningful, they must include Iran in the search for a political settlement.

 Seek a transition that builds on existing institutions, rather than replacing them, and does not alienate those people who have served the government or the army. Neither the interests of the U.S. nor the interests of the peoples of the region are served by collapse of the Syrian state and the resulting political vacuum.

 Syrians must lift up the voices of their full population, including ethnic and religious minorities, refugees (Iraqi and Palestinians) and those who have served the regime, to ensure that none is privileged over the other, and that no component of Syrian society is targeted for retaliation.

 Governments should respond to the United Nations’ call for humanitarian relief funding for displaced Syrians.

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