

## COMMENTARY

# Kofi Annan, Syria and the Uses of Uncertainty in Mediation

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One year after Kofi Annan presented his six-point plan for ending the Syrian civil war, it can only be called a failure. But it is necessary to recall the situation facing the UN-Arab League envoy and his team in early 2012. The Syrian conflict had created serious tensions between the major powers. A Western military intervention appeared unlikely but could not be ruled out with absolute certainty. This commentary contends that Annan's initial priority was to reduce the level of uncertainty inside and outside Syria, thereby creating a framework for political talks. However, in lowering the level of uncertainty, Annan reduced his own leverage as the Syrian government correctly concluded that it would not be punished for failing to cooperate in good faith. The commentary concludes that there are occasions where it is advisable for international mediators to maintain and exploit a degree of uncertainty about how a conflict may develop.

Kofi Annan presented his six-point peace plan (**Table 1**) to end Syria's escalating conflict to the United Nations Security Council on 16 March 2012. One year later, it has little life left in it. Although Annan resigned as the envoy of the United Nations and Arab League for Syria in August 2012, his successor Lakhdar Brahimi has continued to advocate central elements of the plan, including political talks in the framework of an internationally-supervised ceasefire. But the chances of success have diminished month after month while the number of war dead in Syria has risen from considerably fewer than 10,000 in March 2012 to perhaps over 70,000 twelve months later. The Annan plan can only be called a failure.

The key elements of Annan's plan included:

1. An inclusive Syrian-led political process;
2. A UN-supervised cessation of armed violence;
3. Timely provision of humanitarian assistance;
4. Release of arbitrarily detained persons;
5. Freedom of movement for journalists;
6. Respect for freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully.

**Table 1:** Annan's six points

As the Syrian civil war has escalated, critics have divided over whether Annan could be blamed for the deteriorating conflict. Analysts can be grouped into three camps. The most sympathetic believe that he deserves credit for giving diplomacy a chance but that major powers made his task impossible (Barnes-Dacey 2012a). The most condemnatory argue that Annan exacerbated the conflict by tabling a plan

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that gave Syrian President Bashar al-Assad time to consolidate his position and prolong the war (Miller 2012). An intermediate group grants that the former UN Secretary-General made an honest effort to end the conflict in early 2012 but persevered with diplomacy for too long after it had clearly failed (Traub 2012).

Annan has made occasional comments on the situation in Syria since he stood down, but his focus has reverted to Africa, which has been his main priority since the end of his term as UN Secretary-General in 2006. While debates over how to deal with Syria remain fierce, the question of what Annan was trying to do when he launched his plan in March 2012 – and whether his ideas were good ones – has slid from view.

But the anniversary of Annan's plan is a moment for reflection, possibly less because of its relevance to Syria's future than as a model for other crisis diplomacy initiatives in the future. The Annan plan was not a detailed strategy developed at leisure. Annan was appointed on 23 February 2012 and tabled his plan just over three weeks later. It was a quick fix aimed at reducing tensions at a moment in the crisis defined by deep uncertainty about major powers' options and intentions. This was an example of what Bruce D. Jones and I have described as an "inflection point" in a conflict, in which decision-makers make far-reaching choices about political strategies in very fluid crisis situations (Gowan and Jones 2010).

This commentary focuses narrowly on Annan's options and choices in his first few weeks dealing with Syria. A fuller discussion of his performance would of course have to cover his actions from February to August 2012. However, his early decisions affected what he could (and could not) achieve later, especially as his six-point plan became the basis for further diplomacy. I argue that Annan's basic initial goal was precisely to reduce the pervasive uncertainty surrounding the conflict and create a minimum of

trust inside and outside Syria to find a political way out of the crisis. Yet it also contends that this decision to reduce the level of uncertainty, although a natural inclination for a UN mediator, may have been an error. An alternative if riskier strategy might have been to mediate on a more fluid basis that would have offered Assad fewer reassurances about the security of his position. This episode is a reminder that sometimes mediators need to court uncertainty rather than try to build confidence.

### **Annan in Context**

To evaluate Annan's choices during his first weeks as envoy, it is necessary to remember the situation prevailing over Syria at that time. Although the conflict had claimed thousands of lives, it had not metastasized into the all-out civil war we know today. Western officials believed that Assad might be toppled relatively quickly, although the Syrian military scored a series of victories over the ill-equipped and poorly-organized opposition in the weeks immediately after Annan's appointment.

Yet there was a divergence between the relatively limited (though still brutal) nature of the real conflict inside Syria and the scale of the diplomatic conflict over its fate outside it. The UN Security Council was fiercely split over how to act, in part because of raw resentments over Libya. China and Russia had already vetoed two resolutions aimed at putting pressure on Assad. The mounting tensions were threatening to undermine cooperation between the West, Russia, and China over other issues, including Iran's nuclear program (Gowan 2012). A hawkish faction in the Arab League led by Qatar and Saudi Arabia had set its sights on toppling Assad, primarily as a means of weakening Iran. While the Security Council was deadlocked over Syria, these Arab hawks engineered a vote in the UN General Assembly effectively calling for Assad to stand down. There was loose talk in some Arab capitals

about how easy it would be to beat the Syrian army, while French and Turkish officials had spoken in (distinctly more measured) terms about the possibility of opening up humanitarian corridors or a buffer zone inside Syria (Gowan 2011). Meanwhile Western sanctions were reportedly taking a significant toll on Syrian citizens.

Three factors characterized this period. The first was that a great deal of analysis about the situation in Syria – in governments as well as in the public sphere – reflected wishful thinking and false assumptions about the weakness of the Assad regime (Barnes-Dacey 2012b). Well before Annan signed up as envoy, UN officials worried that Western policy-makers had underestimated Assad's resilience. Once Annan was in post, he discovered that many European and US diplomats believed that his purpose was to manage a relatively smooth exit by Assad. He quickly concluded it would not be so easy.

The second factor facing Annan was the accelerating internationalization of the conflict. Western and Arab powers had been involved in efforts to end the violence in Syria since the second quarter of 2011, but their initial priorities had been containing the conflict and putting pressure on Assad to negotiate. Yet, as of February 2012, the greatest risk appeared to be that a containable conflict would become fully internationalized in one of two ways: (i) the launch a proxy war with the major powers and regional players arming the government and rebels while withholding diplomatic cooperation on other matters; or (ii) a direct intervention by Turkey, other NATO members, or Arab countries (or all three).

Reviewing media reports and analyses from this period, the threat of intervention seems largely illusory. Western officials had put out feelers to Turkey about the possibility of deploying it troops southwards, but Ankara was wary of getting into a quagmire in a former part of the Ottoman Empire.

European NATO members and the US had even less desire to launch a new war in the Middle East. Statements from anti-Assad Arab powers about the need for intervention were designed to put pressure on NATO.

Nonetheless, the fact that all the main actors were nervous about intervention did not guarantee that it would not happen. In February and March 2011, after all, it had appeared improbable that Western powers would launch an air campaign over Libya, another conflict that involved quite limited violence on the ground magnified by external diplomatic disputes. The third factor confronting Annan on taking office was simply prevailing uncertainty about how the intentions of major powers towards Syria might evolve as the crisis continued. Russia appeared genuinely convinced that the West might use force (Charap 2013). And while the Assad government responded to the splits in the Security Council by escalating military operations, it could not be certain that its Arab and Western opponents might not take a more aggressive line (Lesch 2012: 196). This doubt was a potential point of leverage for Annan. Should he take advantage of the uncertainties over external powers' intentions or try to clarify them?

### **Annan's Choice**

After his appointment Annan pulled together a team of veteran UN officials and set up office in Geneva. While his team was highly loyal to him, divisions emerged over what strategy he should adopt. A relatively hawkish faction believed that Annan could use the swirling uncertainty to persuade Assad that his position was unsustainable. A more dovish group felt that it was necessary to reassure both Assad and the Russians that regime change was not imminent, creating a framework for talks. The doves were convinced that the chances of an outside intervention were still infinitesimally low and that it was essential to disabuse those opposition forces hoping for a repeat of the

Libyan episode. Meanwhile UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who has mixed relations with Annan, was pressing hard for an early ceasefire.

Annan visited Damascus on 10 March 2012 and held difficult talks with Assad, who declared he would not talk to “terrorists”. Although declaring himself disappointed by this encounter, Annan opted to follow the dovish route. His six-point plan was an effort to create a climate of confidence both outside and inside Syria. By tabling proposals that all the members of the Security Council could approve, he eased tensions between Russia and the West. By getting these powers to sign on to a deliberately non-threatening text, he reassured Assad that the chances of an intervention were low. While the Arab League had called for the president to go, Annan deliberately left Assad’s fate open. The plan promised a “Syrian-led” political process, reassuring the Syrian president that he could keep control of the process.

The substantive details of the plan – including clauses on a cessation of hostilities and the release of political prisoners – was meant to give Assad a chance to send reassuring signals of his own to the opposition. The Syrian government formally accepted the plan in late March but continued military operations. The deployment of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS) in April and May 2012 was a further attempt to provide reassurance to the Syrian public, although hopes for the mission were low as an earlier Arab League mission had failed.

Confidence-building is, of course, a standard element of any mediation process. Yet it is arguable that Annan sacrificed too much leverage through his bid to reassure all sides. Assad and his supporters could now be relatively confident that they would be spared an outside military intervention. Although Damascus took token steps to fulfill the Annan plan, including a partial cessation of hostilities, the government now had one fundamental advantage. Annan and, by extension, the Western powers had

shown their hand early. In doing so they had also sidelined the Arab League hawks, who soon made it clear that they were unhappy with Annan.

Now Assad could drag out the process of implementing the plan through tactics like stalling on the terms for the deployment of UNSMIS. The government and its allies tested the UN’s will to respond forcefully to their actions. An important test came in May, when UNSMIS provided a detailed account of the massacre of over 100 civilians in the village of Houlah and confidently blamed pro-Assad forces. The Security Council was unable to agree on a response due to Russia’s refusal to blame the Syrian government. Episodes such as this gave the government increasing confidence that it could act with impunity while also contributing to the radicalization of rebel factions. Annan had lost the advantages of uncertainty.

Western diplomats and commentators argued that Annan should aim to sow doubts in Assad’s mind about the consequences of his actions. If Annan would not do this himself, my colleague Bruce D. Jones argued in April, others could do so with a clear conscience: “no one can credibly argue that all other options were not exhausted before more forceful measures are used” (Jones 2012). Jones suggested that Western and Arab powers should start planning for a multinational stabilization force in Syria to renew the government’s fear of intervention. (The US did hold military exercises in Jordan at this time, possibly with this goal.) More conservatively, this author suggested that Annan should call a “strategic pause” in his mediation to show Assad that the window for diplomacy was closing (Gowan 2012c).

Yet Annan remained committed to keeping diplomacy going. He worked hard to bring the permanent members of the Security Council and leading Arab powers together in June 2012 to declare their support for a Syrian transition process. Annan seemed focused on maintaining Moscow’s support, but in July tensions spilled over in the Security Council, and China and Russia vetoed

another Western resolution on Syria. Annan became increasingly critical of the big powers and announced his resignation in August.

### The Uses of Uncertainty

This commentary has made three basic points about the inception of the Annan plan: (i) it was a response to pervasive uncertainty; (ii) its primary goal was ending that uncertainty; and (iii) Annan could have opted for an alternative strategy that prioritized extending and using uncertainty to gain additional leverage. Any argument about whether this alternative strategy would have yielded better results is inherently speculative, and it is possible that it would simply have alienated Russia and infuriated Assad. But as we have noted, Annan's advisers were not unified in support of a dovish approach, as some perceived its potential to backfire quickly.

This raises important and broader issues about when mediators should not prioritize building confidence but instead exploit the uncertainties surrounding a conflict so as to maximize their room for maneuver. There may be cases in which a mediator is likelier to get results by keeping some or all parties in a state of doubt about the consequences of their actions. This militates against the preconceptions of many multilateral mediators. The UN's Guidance for Effective Mediation, for example, highlights the need to be "consistent, transparent and even-handed in managing [a] mediation process," which is hard to combine with the deliberate cultivation of uncertainty (United Nations 2012, 9). Annan's choices may become a standard case-study for those exploring the practical and ethical dimensions of using uncertainty as a strategic tool, especially given the context of a particularly complex inflection point in a high-profile conflict.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to recognize that the doves on Annan's team may have been right to argue that, given the low likelihood of an international intervention, the envoy had limited options. If he had tried to create a degree of uncertainty in Assad's mind by talking up the possibility of military

action, he would be accused of bluffing or over-stepping his mandate. His effort to reassure all sides reflected a pessimistic view that Assad remained in a strong position and the president's international opponents lacked the political will to make a game-changing threat of force. Even if Annan made mistakes as envoy, he never had the room for maneuver he needed to gain traction in Damascus.

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