

# Hard choices in Syria

The increasingly desperate efforts by the US to get the Russians, the Iranians and the Syrian regime to agree to a ceasefire are being undermined by the refusal of the west to accommodate the larger and most effective Islamist extremist groups, who are fighting both the Isis jihadis and the forces of President Bashar al-Assad.

The first round of talks collapsed earlier this month and a second attempt at a ceasefire by the end of February is hanging by a thread. There has been some progress: the Syrian government, under pressure from Russia, and an alliance of smaller rebel groups called the High Negotiations Committee, who are armed by the Gulf states, [on Tuesday agreed to observe a pause](#) in fighting starting at the weekend.

But to turn the "pause" into a ceasefire, all the opposition groups must be offered the chance to join the peace talks when they resume. Despite its refusal to play by any acceptable rules — such as breaking its links with al-Qaeda — Jabat al-Nusra, for instance, remains the most powerful Syrian group on the ground fighting Isis. It should not be dismissed out of hand but invited to participate and tested to see whether it will play by international rules.

Accommodation and compromise are needed. In addition to the tragedy of civil war, indiscriminate killing, the destruction of homes and livelihoods and massive migration of peoples into Europe, those left behind in Syria are now trapped between Mr Assad's army and the jihadis.

If it does take place, the pause will be the most positive outcome of the multi-party talks that include the major Arab states, [Turkey](#) and the UN. But the move does not go as far as a ceasefire because all parties involved have inserted heavy conditions on its implementation. There have been limits set on how long the pause would last and where food convoys would be allowed to go, while the regime has not agreed to stop all bombing.

The High Negotiations Committee members prefer to call it "a temporary truce". Their main aim is for humanitarian aid to reach the 18 or so towns and regions where people are starving. Russia seems serious this time round.

President Vladimir Putin endorsed the pause and said that Moscow would work with the US to monitor it. The agreement "could become an example for responsible joint action of the international community", he said in a statement.

However, the committee does not represent the strongest rebel groups nor constitute effective moderate or democratic forces that the US and its allies could build up. The only choice seems to be between less extreme and more extreme Islamists.

To weaken Isis, turn the pause into a ceasefire and allow for wider peace talks that would address the future of Mr Assad, the American, Russian and UN negotiators should allow all the opposition groups, including Jabat al-Nusra, a possible seat at the table. So far, this week's [agreement excludes](#) Isis, Jabat al-Nusra; other UN- and US-designated "terrorist" organisations such as Ahrar al-Sham; and Jaish al-Islam which the Russians, Iran and the Assad regime label a terrorist group.

The international message should be that all the fighting groups except Isis can take part in the talks as long as they accept some conditions, which should be set at a low bar to encourage compliance and which could lead to a much wider ceasefire. All would have to accept the terms of a limited ceasefire, allow humanitarian convoys through the areas under their control and pledge to protect civilians, including non-Muslim minorities.

With such a framework, the onus of deciding who participates in future talks — in an encouraging sign the UN Special Envoy for Syria said on Thursday that he would soon set a date for peace talks to start again in Geneva, but the weekend pause would be crucial — would rest with the Islamist groups themselves, rather than the big powers having to choose between them. The groups could refuse to take part, but then they would be true pariahs, alienating the Syrian population they are trying to win over to their cause. The Arab states — which are not much help now — also need to do much more. All the Islamist factions fighting in Syria have at one time or another taken money and/or weapons from one or several Gulf states. Those states should call in their debts and help bring the parties to the table.

Right now, Syria is the incubator of Islamist extremism with the potential of breaking up the Middle East and laying more bombs in Europe. After five years of war and a vast refugee and humanitarian crisis, the west's political choices are limited, especially since Russia entered the fray. Whatever shape the ceasefire talks eventually take, it is vital that they include the broadest possible participation of all Syrian groups. That is the only way the process can have a hope of succeeding and Syria's misery come to an end.

*The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, most recently 'Pakistan on the Brink'*