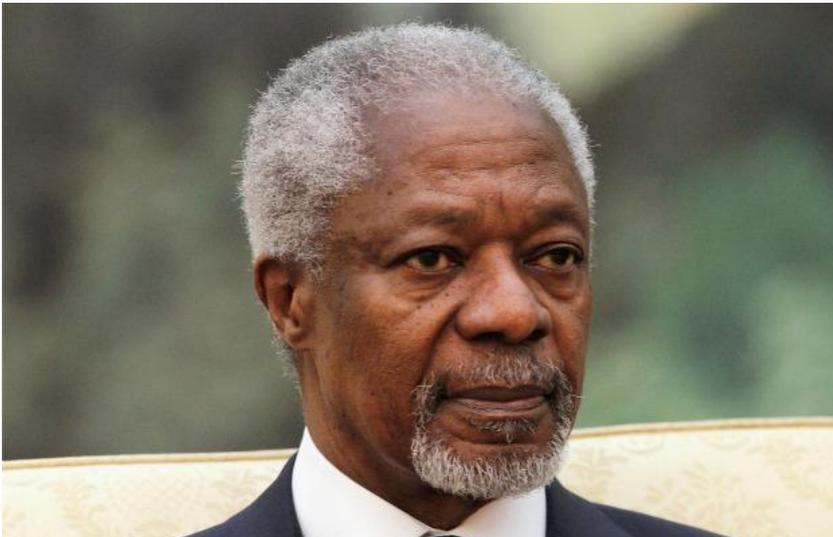




Is Annan's Syria cease-fire worth the paper it's printed on?

By Colum Lynch ■ Tuesday, 27 March 2012



Kofi Annan today announced a rare breakthrough in his efforts to halt the bloodshed in Syria, saying that President **Bashar al-Assad** had endorsed his six-point diplomatic plan calling for an immediate cease-fire, access for international aid workers, and the start of political talks leading to a multiparty democracy.

But there was a sense among observers that we've been here before.

Last November, the Syrian government signed a deal with the Arab League to withdraw its military forces from besieged towns and to accept a "road map" for political reform. But Assad never implemented the pact. U.N. Secretary General **Ban Ki-moon**, meanwhile, has become so weary of Assad's promises to rein in his security forces that he hasn't even bothered to call him in several months. "He made all these promises," Ban told reporters last September, "but these promises have become now broken promises."

Indeed, many Syria observers believe Assad is seeking to bog down Annan and his team of mediators in a fruitless diplomatic process that will provide him with political cover to continue his military campaign to crush the opposition. Even today, the Local Coordination Committees, an activist group that monitors the violence, said 20 people had died by mid afternoon, according to a [report](#) in the *New York Times*, and fighting was reported along the Lebanese border.

"Assad has everything to gain from accepting the Annan initiative," said **Joshua Landis**, the director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma. "The president is looking for a way to end the uprising without stepping down, or turning power over to the revolutions. The new U.N. peace plan does not insist on having Assad handing over power, which is why Assad finds it acceptable.... He can play along with this because ultimately he needs to slow down the stampede towards greater and greater sanctions and [secure international] pressure on the opposition not to send weapons inside Syria."

Despite the grim assessment, many observers say that the diplomatic campaign to rein in President Assad has been gaining strength, driven in part by waning interest in the West for military intervention in Syria.

Russia and China, Syria's strongest defenders at the United Nations, have thrown their political weight behind Annan's peace initiative, prompting Assad to commit to a deal he had rejected two weeks ago.

The fragmented Syrian opposition attracted hundreds of anti-Assad representatives, including the exiled Muslim Brotherhood, to a meeting in Istanbul. Turkey and Norway, meanwhile, have shuttered their embassies in Damascus, furthering the country's diplomatic isolation.

"I do think conditions for diplomacy at the international level are better than last time," said **Marc Lynch**, a fellow **Foreign Policy** blogger and Middle East scholar at George Washington University. "Am I optimistic? No. My best guess is that Assad will try to play this the same way he played the Arab League plan," he said. But he "may find himself with less room for maneuver."

Lynch and other observers say that President Assad's standing -- which has been boosted by a series of military victories against the opposition -- risks the prospect of being weakened through a political process. "Assad is clearly winning at the military level," Lynch said. But his military gains, he added are "empty tactical victories. At a broader level, all signs say to me he is losing control, losing legitimacy."

Richard Gowan, a U.N. specialist at New York University's Center for International Cooperation, writes **today** in *World Politics Review* that the renewed push for a diplomatic outcome reflects a realization by "all the main players in the debate, that their disputes, which had been poisonous since mid-2011, were spiraling out of control." But Gowan also voiced concern that it may be too late for Annan's plan to succeed.

Russia and China, which have seen their standing in the region suffer from repeated vetoes in the Security Council, saw Annan's diplomatic overture as a way out of their isolation. And Western powers, reluctant to intervene militarily in Syria if diplomacy fails, are showing renewed interest in promoting a U.N. diplomatic effort to end the crisis.

But Western diplomats also struck a cautious note. "The Assad regime's acceptance of joint United Nations and Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan's six point plan would represent a significant first step towards bringing an end to the violence and the bloodshed, but only if it is genuinely and seriously meant," British Foreign Secretary William Hague said after the announcement. "This has not been the case with previous commitments the regime has made. The key will be concrete implementation that brings a cessation of all hostilities and leads to a genuine political transition accompanied by freedom of access for humanitarian assistance and the media, and the release of political prisoners. We will continue to judge the Syrian regime by its practical actions not by its often empty words."

Landis remained even more doubtful about the prospects for a peaceful outcome, saying the opposition has failed to present a viable alternative to the regime while the ongoing crisis is bringing greater economic hardship to ordinary Syrians.

"I see Syrians starving to death and Assad remaining in power for a long time," he said. "Even if he can destroy the opposition, he can't put Syria back together again. But the country will ultimately collapse in disorder."