

FACILITATING A POLITICAL TRANSITION IN SYRIA

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Introduction

The Arab Spring shook the fragile foundation of Syria, effectively highlighting the pre-existing sentiments of conflict and separatism along sectarian, ethnic and tribal lines. Refusing to respond to the calls of nationwide protests, President Bashar al-Assad responded with unrestricted force, effectively plunging the country into a fully-fledged civil war, very similar to what Hobbes described as the state of nature. Five years later, the war has all but damaged Syria's security, political, economic and social domains, causing more than \$200 billion of losses (Abdul Razzaq, 2015) and spilling over to cost nearby countries an estimated \$35 billion (World Bank, 2016). In terms of human suffering, it has claimed the lives of 250,000-470,000,¹ injured over 1-2 million Syrians,² and forcefully displaced 54% of the pre-war population, including 4.6 million people who fled the country and 6.6 million others who were internally displaced by violence (UNOCHA, 2016).

The intensifying conflict, coupled with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has transformed Syria into an international stage for the proxy confrontation between local, regional and international powers, including the United States, Russia, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Lebanon, as each of them supports various Syrian players in the conflict. This has led to the inability of any party to achieve an absolute military victory and prolonged the conflict, risking the expansion of its military dimensions and political consequences.

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2 UNOCHA and SCPR, respectively.

As the past peace initiatives led by the League of Arab States, United Nations, the United States, Russia, Friends of Syria Group, and Saudi Arabia have not produced much more than statements, there is a cautious attitude towards the current efforts led by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to facilitate the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

Therefore, amid the prevailing climate, this policy brief primarily focuses on the different elements pertaining to the negotiated ceasefire and explores how the agreement can be linked to a transitional period with the aim of gradually restoring Syria's internal security through a temporary partition.

The Cessation of Hostilities

The most recent US-Russian-brokered nationwide ceasefire negotiated in the week after the February 12 meeting in Munich was described by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini as “a step in the right direction.” Indeed, assuming it holds, the agreement offers two key benefits: first, it increases the prospects of expedited delivery of urgently-needed humanitarian aid to the besieged areas of Deir Ez Zour, Idlib, Damascus and Rural Damascus³ (US Department of State, 2016); and, second, it addresses the High Negotiation Committee's (HNC) demands for participating in the Geneva peace negotiations: namely to halt the bombardments of towns, release detainees, and end the blockades on rebel-held areas.

The agreement, however, falls short by not being based on a balance of power on the battlefield, as the opposition groups have been weakened by the recent intensity of the Russian and Syrian regime assaults; by not specifically mentioning which parts of Syria would be controlled by each party (Brawner & O'Hanlon, 2016); and by not addressing one of the belligerents' main concerns, particularly that the ceasefire will not be used to consolidate the positions of the other through the resupply of arms or soldiers/militants.

The cessation of hostilities will be monitored by the ISSG-assembled Ceasefire Task Force. Its main tasks being to: exchange pertinent information to prevent the

³ Specifically, Fouah and Kafrayah in Idlib; Mouadhimiyyeh in Damascus; and Madaya in Rural Damascus.

belligerents from being attacked by Russian Armed Forces, the US-led Counter ISIS Coalition, the Armed Forces of the Syrian government, and other forces supporting them; clearly determine the territories held by the UN Security Council-designated terrorist organisations (mainly ISIS and al-Nusra Front); resolve allegations of non-compliance; and exclude persistent, non-compliant parties to the agreement. Yet, while these may prove to be effective mechanisms for monitoring the compliance for a short-term cessation of hostilities, any long-term, sustainable deal will most likely require the deployment of peacekeeping forces.

Towards a Transitional Period

With each party and their respective international supporters being adamant on the elimination of the other and unable to achieve an absolute military victory a political compromise seems to be the most viable scenario. In that case, the status quo indicates that a political settlement could potentially result in the partitioning of Syria. The possibility has been expressed recently both by Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya'alon and US Secretary of State John Kerry as an eventual solution to the Syrian Civil War. It has similarly been proposed by Brookings Director of Research Michael O'Hanlon as "the most promising construct for a stable country" (O'Hanlon, 2016).

Using the confederal model as a transitional goal, Syria would be partitioned into three zones: an Alawite-Christian zone, an Arab Sunni zone, and a Kurdish zone. While each zone would be an autonomous entity, with separate security forces, and separate leaders; they would all be united under a weak central government.

As mentioned earlier, the presence of peacekeeping forces will be imperative for the enforcement of a long-term sustainable deal. The necessity of peacekeeping forces lies in their function to work on the various sides of the conflict to maintain peace and security in the protected zones. By keeping the belligerents separate from each other, peacekeeping forces could also assist in the withdrawal and, in the long run, disarmament of militant groups (PILPG, 2013). That being said, a confidential strategy paper written by UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, excluded the possibility of a UN peacekeeping force in Syria:

“The current international and national political context and the current operational environment strongly suggest that a UN peacekeeping response relying on international troops or military observers would be an unsuitable modality for ceasefire monitoring” (Lynch, 2016).

This means that any peacekeeping operations would necessitate the joint coordination between regional and international powers or institutions to deploy peacekeeping forces, as opposed to relying on the belligerents themselves for enforcement. Considering that almost half of all ceasefires or peace operations ending civil conflicts tend to falter, the lack of peacekeeping forces may significantly increase that prospect in Syria. Furthermore, the presence of nearly 1,500 opposition groups with various leanings, several international powers with distinct aims, the worst migration crisis since World War II and deep enmities certainly exacerbates the matter (Lynch, 2016).

Challenges to Restoring Internal Security

In the event that political settlement in Syria results in partition, the post-settlement restoration of security will require that international and regional powers simultaneously work with various Syrian actors to incrementally build regions of stability throughout the country. Such support can take the forms of military advisors or military assistance. The former would help transform the haphazard militias into more professional security forces operating under the framework of an institutional structure; and the latter would bolster ground and air support to rebel groups in their battles against ISIS and al-Nusra Front. Subsequently, the newly-reformed and supported security forces would be more able to police their zones, protect minorities, facilitate humanitarian aid, and perform more effective counter terrorism operations. As the conditions improve in these areas, the reconstruction process can gradually take place with the help of foreign economic recovery assistance.

However, the confederal approach's enforcement is neither without risks nor blind spots. First, by partitioning Syria according to the demographic distributions of maps, a division lacking the coherence of boundaries for different peoples may result. Operationally, this will almost definitely be complicated by the fact that

over half of the country's population has been uprooted. Second, by forming autonomous, self-governing, self-policing zones, there is a possibility of concretising the territorial, political, and cultural divides among the so-called regions of stability. This especially poses challenges for future state-building efforts in the context of constitutional drafting and elections and, thereby, endangers the prospects of having a unified Syria after the transitional period is over. It also increases the risk of conflict, particularly if each zone's respective populations perceive the divisions as intrusive to their predefined homeland (Shelef, 2015). Finally, a possible outbreak of sectarian conflict emanating from the aforementioned factors may lead to renewed torrents of refugees fleeing the eruption of violence.

Policy Recommendations

Considering that Syria's de facto partition is, to some extent, playing out on the battlefield, an official political settlement formalising the country's division will need to address four issues to ensure a relatively smooth transition takes place. First, the partition should be presented as a transitional as opposed to permanent plan, which is necessary to guide the country through a process of rebuilding internal security. Therefore, a state-building roadmap should indicate and plan for the future prospect of a unified Syria. Perhaps in the future, the reformed security forces of the autonomous zones could move towards the formation of a national guard. Second, the implementation of the deal should call for meticulous international and regional coordination of "population transfer, division of natural resources, and rights of minorities" (Mendelsohn, 2015) to prevent any incidents of ethnic cleansing. Third, the enforcement of the temporary partition should be negotiated among international and regional powers in order to facilitate the establishment of a Joint Committee to lead and monitor the agreement through an international peacekeeping force. Finally, as previously noted, military advisers and military assistance for the groups countering ISIS and al-Nusra Front should be increased to help regain the lost territories and expedite the restoration of internal security.

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