

FUTURE OF SYRIA

Istanbul, 10 October 2016, Global Political Trends Center

report
from the Dialogue Workshop



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dialogue Workshop on “The Future of Syria” was organized as part of the activities of a EuroMeSCo Working Package, led by the Global Political Trends Center. The event took place in Istanbul on 10 October, 2016. It consisted of four sessions reflecting the four themes of the Joint Policy Study.

The first session with Dr. Salam Kawakibi from the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) analysed the situation of minorities in Syria and the prospects of national reconciliation. The second session was led by Dr. Sylvia Tiryaki from the Global Political Trends Center (GPoT) and tackled the topic of post-war military and Security Sector Reform. The third session, with Dr. Eckart Woertz from the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) was devoted to the issue



of post-war reconstruction and development in Syria. The last session, led by Dr. Sylvia Tiryaki, examined future political and legal structures in Syria.

During the sessions, the authors presented the initial findings of their research and contrasted them with other participants to the meeting, including practitioners, experts from the academia, civil society organisations and think tanks.

DETAILS OF THE FOUR SESSIONS

National Reconciliation and Protection of Minorities

Dr. Salam Kawakibi (ARI) acknowledged the difficulty of addressing the minority situation in Syria. The author recognised the need to deconstruct and question the concept of minorities, especially to avoid Western biased narratives focused on religion and ethnicity. Therefore, he considered the concept from the political point of view. The author claimed that all the Syrians citizens were a political minority in the country as, since 1958, they had been excluded from the political sphere which was monopolised by a few. He introduced Nikolaos van Dam's observation that, in Syria, "there was the minority of the power but not the power of a minority (the Alawite)." The author highlighted that "minority" was indeed a catch-all concept that could be easily instrumentalised. When the Syrian revolution started in 2011, the author stressed that all religious and ethnic components of the Syrian society were involved in the protests, but the regime "kidnapped" the issue of the minorities to apply the colonial concept of "divide and rule". As a result of this process, it must be acknowledged that problems between minorities were now a fact on the ground and the social cohesion of the Syrian society had been broken.

The situation was illustrated by the situation of the Christians in Syria, on which European far-right and right-wing parties had been focused, raising the false debate of the "protection of the minorities". The Christian clergy had been co-opted by a regime that also abducted bishops in order to raise sectarian tensions. As

consequence of a widespread feeling of second-class citizenship and the economic hardship, Christians had massively emigrated from the country.

Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders

Some researchers acknowledged the issue of the conceptual definition of minorities. It was observed that in certain instances, a person could be both part of a political minority and an ethnic or religious minority. A participant claimed that marginalised voices such as those of Syrian women could be also tackled in the study, with a focus on ways to institutionalise them. It was also remarked that the issue of the minorities, especially the exodus of Christians, was a question cutting across the Middle East and could be framed in that way. Therefore, several participants put forward the idea of a regional mechanism to protect minorities, such as a regional charter or a court of human rights.

Ways to ease sectarian tensions in a future Syria were explored by the participants. Some underlined that inclusive reconciliation councils could be set up first at the local level to get people back together. The education system should be involved as well. A participant claimed that some initiatives could be built on the work of the Syrian civil society. Others focused their intervention on the need to redefine the concepts of Syrian citizenship as well as the national identity. It was claimed that a new social contract was definitely needed. The concept of transitional justice was also explored. Indeed, it was highlighted that accountability was key for the national reconciliation to happen. Finally, it was claimed that a power-sharing formula could only be a way to stop the conflict but would not be a desirable long-term solution. In that case, a Taif-like arrangement with all its defects would be preferable to a Dayton scenario, but it was argued with pessimism that the future of Syrian was not anymore in Syrians' hands.

The Syrian Military: The Day After

In the absence of the author of the chapter, Dr. Florence Gaub (EU ISS), the initial findings of the author were presented by Dr. Sylvia Tiryaki (GPoT). In her research, the author focused on ways to stabilise the security sector which was

one of the most important and challenging task in a post-war configuration. Indeed, the author stressed that the armed forces would have to ensure post-war security while reforming themselves and integrate former rebel fighters. Therefore, the study will resort to the concepts of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), Security Sector Reform (SSR) and previous experiences. It was argued these were tasks that would require an extensive period of time to be implemented and a proposed timeline of 18 months would appear inadequate.

The issue of vetting was also raised, as it would be important to make sure that individuals in the post-war military forces were not involved in war crimes. A formula would have to be found that could both accommodate security and justice needs. While Syria would likely lack a context in which demobilisation and disarmament by force would be possible, national stability providing security and economic development will be key for combatants to demobilise and hand their weapons. On Security Sector Reform, it was argued that assembling divergent elements of Syria's security sector was only the first step in a much longer reform process which would require more effort. From the ministry of defence to the laws governing violence in Syria, sustainable reform would have to overcome several political and institutional hurdles before it could be undertaken.

Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders

The participants observed that the author should look into military-civilian relationship in Syria. Going back into history to understand how the Syrian army was structured could be useful. It was argued that Hafez and Bashar al-Assad destroyed the Syrian army with a Baathist ideology to build their own guard and turn it into a de facto "Assadist" militia. Therefore, the legitimacy and the doctrine of a new Syrian army should be questioned. It was deemed obvious that the current Syrian army had lost its legitimacy and it would take a lot of time for all sectors to recognize new armed forces. One of the post-war scenario which could be explored was the amalgamation of the Syrian army and the Free Syrian army, as one of the participants commented on the lack of

manpower needed to reform the security sector. It was stressed that a new army would need international support and could not include community or ethnic quota.

Participants underlined that the main challenge was to find ways to reform totally or partially the Syrian army without making it collapse. Therefore, it was argued that the study needed to take a step further and look in depth into the issue of the structuration of the new armed forces. The sequences of the reform and the critical branches of the security forces to target (ministry of defence, chief staff, officers etc.) were deemed crucial for the success of the SSR process.

Also, it was observed that it would be important to distinguish between the Syrian Army and the different paramilitary groups, including local ones such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party's militia, and foreign armed groups such as the Hezbollah. The DDR process would be important in order to reintegrate local militias. As the issue of ex-combatants' unemployment was raised, programmes turning them into farmers to contribute to the reconstruction were mentioned. Regarding foreign militias, it was acknowledged that the experience had shown that they never totally go home. Indeed, it was argued that, as power brokers, they had have economic and political interests to maintain. It was important to take into account that, as much as they had been shaping the war, they would most likely be shaping the day after.

Syria's Economy and the War Damage

First, Dr. Eckart Woertz presented the nature of Syria's pre-war economy. The Syrian economy in the 1980s had a sluggish growth mainly because of a debt crisis. However, the 1990s witnessed steady rising of the economic activity thanks to the performance of the mining sector including oil production and phosphate (27-28%) in addition to light manufacturing. Assad's agricultural policy (20% of the economy) allowed the country to be self-sufficient in food production before the major drought at the end of the 2000s. Tourism contributed about 8% to Syria's GDP. With regard to the current situation, the

author gave statistics describing the need of humanitarian assistance, the lack of child education, the disruption of electricity, the damage to the oil sector and the sharp fall in the country's GDP.

Then, possible scenarios for the reconstruction of the economy were assessed by the author. As the severe drought which hit the agricultural sector before the war demonstrated, agriculture as previously practiced could not be sustainable. Nevertheless, it could still play a significant role in the future economy. A question mark was put over the re-invigoration of the declining oil sector as a strategic lever for the economy. However, the return of Syrian refugees might play an important role, notably through the repatriation of funds.

The role of the international community was also discussed by the author. While the possibilities to introduce a Marshall Plan in Syria were deemed to be limited, IMF-led reforms were not considered positively due to their role in the Syrian economic crisis in the early 2000s. The economic reconstruction should then be measured in regard to its contribution to peace. Moreover, for the reconstruction to begin, the need of a comprehensive peace agreement was mandatory.

Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders

First, some participants observed that most of the official statistics on the Syrian economy were not reliable, especially those related to the oil sector which was considered a private issue by the Syrian leadership. Using the hydro-carbon industries, including potential offshore gas resources, as lever for the reconstruction was questioned by the participants. Enhancement and extraction measures could still be taken. But it was acknowledged that relying on this sector could be mixed blessings for the country: it could engineer a quick catch up but it would create a rentier economy instead of a diversified and healthy one. But, unlike Libya or Iraq, Syria was not dependent on only one resource for its recovery. It was argued that agriculture would be important sector but it would have to face the growing scarcity of water that could also trigger conflicts in the region. Therefore, it was stressed that water may also play an important role in the future of Syria. Beyond that, it was highlighted that remittances from

the Syrian diaspora would have a crucial role. They were providing relief during the war and they might help for the reconstruction as well.

Lastly, the issue of potential donors was addressed by participants. It was stressed that they would obviously have a say regarding the reconstruction of the country. Another challenge would be the need for Syria to escape the trap of aid dependency in the future. A participant observed that aid should be targeted towards state-building and supporting efficient economic policies while another attendee said the emphasis was to put on human development (education, health) rather than capitalistic development. For this, an assessment of the pre-conflict phase alongside human development indicators was needed. In addition, it was stressed that looking into previous successful international experiences of reconstruction could be useful for the study.

State-Building: Political, Structural and Legal Issues

Dr. Sylvia Tiryaki (GPoT) began her presentation by acknowledging the difficulties in coming out with a clear outline in terms of political and legal structures for the future of Syria. The situation on the ground had led to a huge number of deaths, refugees, internal displaced people, while the Syrian opposition had been fragmented. These issues had affected the very fabric of the Syrian society as such.

While reviewing various documents and scenarios, the author pointed out the issue of whether Syria would have a unitarian or federal system with the latter gaining support with each passing day. A reference was made to the 'Social Contract of Rojava', a document with features of a Constitution for the three Kurdish-majority cantons of Northern Syria. This document was the only one in Syria referring to federalism but also possessed undertones to suggesting secessionist inhibitions.

Furthermore, the positions of the major stakeholders in the Syrian conflict were analysed. Iran and Iraq were said to likely vouch for a federal Syria whilst Saudi

Arabia, Lebanon, Russia, Israel, the United States and especially Turkey, as being concerned with the Kurdish question, were likely to be in favour of a unitary arrangement.

Some points in the 'UN Commonalities Paper' were analysed, including the emphasis on Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the democratic and non-sectarian features of the state. The roadmap of the High Negotiations Committee was also considered by the author who highlighted elements of the document stressing the need for the unity of Syria but also ensuring cultural rights for Kurdish citizens.

The 1950 Syrian Constitution and its main articles were also discussed as a potential basis for a transitional period. This document which reflected a national consensus spirit included a distinction between the three powers of government, as well as check and balances. Lastly, elements of the Lebanese Taif Agreement (1989) were raised as a potential prospect for the future political and legal structures of Syria.

Feedbacks from other researchers and stakeholders

As the discussion focused on the issue of the structure of the state, it was stressed there was a consensus among Syrians in favour of a decentralised political and administrative system. Indeed, Damascus's rule would not be accepted by some provinces anymore. It was argued that the extreme centralisation of power was also one of the key reasons for the outbreak of the revolution in 2011. A new distribution of power was then needed. Thus, it was highlighted that the experience of the local councils, as new models of local governance, could be a basis for a decentralisation process. A number of participants also added that lessons could be drawn from different models of decentralisation (France, Spain) to apply them to Syria, but warned that experiences of decentralisation in the Middle East had not been very promising so far.

A participant linked the issue of the Rojava as established by the PYD (Democratic Union Party) to the agenda of the Kurdish question in Turkey and

the Kurdish regional project. In order to find a way to continue including the Kurds in a future Syria, it was argued that a first symbolic step could be taken with the removal of the term “Arab” from the constitutional name of the country. With regard to a partition of the country, another participant recalled that Russia was the first to resort to the threat of a division to pressure the international community with the concept of the “useful Syria”. It was said that, Russia as a key stakeholder of the conflict, would be involved in the future of the country.

Concerning the 1950 Constitution, it was said to be a compromise between ideologies, however it failed to address the diversity of the Syrian society. In addition, the Constitution could not be relied on as such as it was drafted before Syria signed many conventions, especially on human rights. In order to guarantee the democratic nature of the state, it was added that references to Arabism or Islamism had to be avoided.

Lastly, a number of participants discussed the Taif Agreement as a possible model for Syria, but were rather sceptical. They underlined that this agreement was meant to be a transitional pact from consociationalism towards a fully-fledged democracy but in practice, it rather reinforced sectarianism. In addition, it was stressed that it made war lords the new political leaders of Lebanon. Moreover, the participants underlined that the agreement was enforced by a foreign power (Syria) with international support, a configuration which was difficult to repeat in the case of Syria.





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