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NORWEGIAN PEACEBUILDING RESOURCE CENTRE

Expert Analysis

May 2015

# Syrian voices on the Syrian conflict:
# A solution for Syria

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## Executive summary

Syria is central to the security and future of the Middle East, but conditions for a resolution of the Syrian conflict through a political solution do not exist. Currently, neither side is capable of bringing stability to the country. Since the Islamic State routed Iraqi forces in Mosul in summer 2014 regional players have developed a new sense of urgency because of the jihadi threat, but not sufficiently so to bury their rivalries. It is clear that the Syrian question will not be resolved without a coherent U.S. strategy of calculated involvement that does not involve fuelling the conflict, but rather building capacity to restore security by organising a coherent Syrian military force without involving foreign forces. The expert analysis assumes that the countries with the greatest influence in the conflict are still keen to put Syria back together and pleads for a more serious U.S.-Russian engagement. It suggests that the U.S. should define an end game that gives Syrian fighters a sense of purpose if it wants to see tangible results on the ground. The aim is to stop Assad's killing machine and force him to transfer power to a transitional authority over an agreed period, an authority that would stabilise the country and lead the reconstruction process.

### Introduction

Syria is known to Arabs as the heart of the Arab world, and in four years of conflict it has proved to be the command centre of the region's nervous system. This conflict has raised collective fears; triggered unexpected solidarities across the region, the Islamic world and beyond; and unleashed competing projects and grand hegemonic designs, with a multitude of actors and agendas colliding on Syrian soil.

In four years there has been no serious effort to resolve the Syrian conflict. The strategy of containment advocated by President Obama proved to be a fantasy when the Assad regime actively sought to regionalise the conflict, fuel radicalism and encourage chaos, and ended up giving birth to a clone of itself in the shape of the Islamic State (IS).

Is Assad a lesser evil, as some officials in the West are now openly suggesting? Only if one is willing to ignore his use of chemical weapons, Scud missiles and barrel bombs, as well as the documented mass torture in his prisons, and the death and starvation among populations besieged by regime forces. Some may say that irrespective of moral considerations, a controlled transition that preserves some continuity in governance requires that Assad be "part of the solution", as United Nations (UN) special envoy Staffan de Mistura has stated. The question is whether Assad is interested and, if he is, whether he is capable of securing such a transition. So far, he has not changed his position one iota, as his recent interviews with the international media indicate (e.g. BBC, 2015; Tepperman, 2015). More importantly, his capacity to restore state authority over the entire national territory is seriously in doubt. Assad appears increasingly to be a façade for an Iranian-led strategy with direct presence on the ground, leading some to denounce an Iranian occupation of Syria, but simultaneously raising the question of whether the interlocutor who can actually deliver a solution has not changed. No party can roll back the terrible consequences of the inadequate management of the conflict by expressing support for a political initiative; governments who have found it convenient to hide behind statements to the effect that only a political solution will end the conflict are simply contributing to its prolongation. The conditions do not currently exist for a political solution in Syria and they need to be created before an actual settlement becomes a credible prospect.

## International failure: "by the way, what about Syria?"

There is ample evidence of how the peaceful Syrian uprising of spring 2011 turned into all-out war. Thousands of activists have testified how they resisted taking up arms for months and how the spiral of events brought the disaster that Syria is experiencing today – how demonstrators were shot at, how people attending funerals were shot at or arrested, how young men were tortured in prisons and how young women were victims of sexual violence in prisons and sometimes in front of their male relatives. These factors, combined with the absence of a clear condemnation of the regime by the UN Security Council, encouraged activists to take up arms. There is also wide agreement (including probably in Russia) that the July 2012 bombing of what was known as the "crisis cell",[1] in which the main regime figures who could have taken a more moderate course died, marked a turning point in the crisis. Those who remained and prevailed, led by Bashar al-Assad and his brother Maher, shared the view that there should be no political response to the uprising. The regime's divorce from the population quickly reached the point of no return and moderate opposition figures were faced with a wall of rejection and were marginalised as a result. The regime was increasingly behaving like an occupying force in its own country.

Syrians turned inwards to develop survival mechanisms within their communities and activists sought foreign support to confront the brutal repression. The sources of foreign money coming mainly from conservative Islamic governmental and non-governmental organisations introduced an Islamist discourse that often drifted into sectarianism. Secular democratic activists lost the space in which they once rebelled and became irrelevant, and the fight against the regime was depicted as a fight against Alawites and Shias. Russia and Iran decided to throw in their lot with the regime and provided massive financial and direct military support. The ingredients of a protracted conflict with alarming regional dimensions were all in place by mid-2012 after the failure of two observer missions, one by the Arab League (December 2011-January 2012) and one by the UN (April-August 2012). Each draft resolution vetoed by Russia at the Security Council led almost immediately to the emergence of new groups on the ground proclaiming the formation of a Salafi brigade with a more radical discourse. The correlation between the absence of a relevant international response and the radicalisation of fighters on the ground is striking (Kodmani & Legrand, 2013).

As one of the UN special envoys confessed, every summit and ministerial meeting he attended in the course of his mission was dedicated to many other issues of concern and interest to the parties and ended with the officials involved saying "by the way, what about Syria?"

This has been the case all along for the U.S. and Russia. The former has the necessary capability and political clout to change the equation on the ground and induce a change of calculations on the part of the regime and its allies. The latter holds the key to an effective political process that would end the war. Yet both have lacked the political will to act decisively.

Washington has provided the kind of support that keeps the opposition alive, but has refrained from giving more; it has also failed to define a coherent strategy to end the conflict and it has actively prevented its allies from providing the kind of weaponry that would make a difference. President Obama has had many valid reasons for not wanting to intervene in Syria. But while he did not want to own the Syria problem as he does Iraq, his dual failure in this crisis has been, firstly, that of articulating a strong public position ("Assad must step aside") without providing the means to achieve it; and, secondly, that of not reassessing his position in light of the gravity of the situation and in spite of the strong advice from the most senior figures in his government about the "imminent threat" represented by the situation in Syria. If he feared an internationalisation of the crisis, such internationalisation occurred in the nastiest possible way with the emergence of the most powerful terrorist organisation in modern history. Washington may well be adding a third failure as we write by carrying out air raids on IS in Syria without defining a specific strategy that sets the end game for this campaign, leading Obama's secretary of defence, Chuck Hagel, to resign four months into the campaign against IS.

Russia has been the obstructive force par excellence at the diplomatic level, vetoing almost every Security Council resolution criticising the Syrian regime, and when it decided to host negotiations it failed to ensure minimal credibility for the process. Yet whatever its motivation, Russia should be encouraged to devote more attention to a political process to resolve the conflict in Syria, if only because it has the capacity to pressure the regime – but is only likely to do so in the context of a process that it leads. The aim is therefore to gradually develop some common ground between the opposition and Russia. If this process fails to achieve anything after several attempts, this failure is likely to reflect negatively on Russia's relations with the regime and encourage it to become more critical of the latter's intransigence. It seems Russian frustration with the lack of cooperation by the regime's delegation was already noticeable after the January meeting in Moscow 2015.

## Creating the conditions for a political solution

The current situation on the ground does not present the conditions for a political solution. UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura is experiencing what his two predecessors experienced before him. He is trying to create a space for

1 Composed of Minister of Defence Douad Rajha; the deputy defence minister and Assad's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat; the chief of the crisis cell, Hassan Turkmani; and the head of the National Security Bureau, Hisham Bakhtiar. The minister of the interior was also present and was wounded.

himself to manoeuvre and has proposed a freeze of the fighting in the city of Aleppo. De Mistura has little hope that his idea will be accepted without pressure from the countries that have influence over the regime. For now, the U.S. administration has merely wished him good luck and Russia has not sought to involve him in its own efforts when it convened a meeting in Moscow.

On the ground, too many players want a continuation of the conflict: IS and other jihadis, the regime's special forces and its other militias, and the warlords on both sides. Those who want an end to the war are the weakest: the local groups with no ideological agenda who are rooted in their communities and are still defending the original objectives of the uprising (freedom, social justice, an end to dictatorship), and the overwhelming majority of civilians who have nobody to represent them.[2]

Outside Syria, governments who have condemned Assad are frustrated by a U.S. policy that has made them part of the reluctant and indecisive camp able only to express embarrassment when confronted with the continuation of the regime's mass murder enterprise. European states, e.g. France and Britain in particular, may have thought at certain moments that they could take the lead in undertaking some decisive moves, but the U.S. has actively deterred them from doing so. The result has been a debilitated Europe facing the threat of jihadis moving in and out of Syria from Europe and the flow of illegal refugees drowning in the Mediterranean. In Iran and Russia some pragmatic politicians have been advocating a compromise with the opposition, but have not been heard so far. In private they express the hope that a firm message from Washington would help strengthen their position at home.

Inside Syria, all sides are watching the signals from Washington: members of Assad's government discuss every statement made by U.S. officials; loyalist officers have repeatedly sent messages expressing a desire to defect if only a plan for the opposition existed; and among the anti-Assad groups non-ideological fighters are hoping for serious support from Western countries that would allow them to regroup quickly and regain the upper hand over Islamist groups.

*The anti-IS campaign and the end game*

The U.S.-led campaign against IS enjoys a broad consensus among Arab and world leaders and public opinion. Syrian opposition groups agree that IS is a dangerous enemy; in fact, they were the first to confront it in 2013. To yield quick and durable results, however, the campaign needs a clear definition of its end game. For now the U.S. president misses no opportunity to restate that the anti-IS strategy is aimed at Iraq only. In Syria, selected groups of fighters are given some weapons and assigned the task of fighting IS exclusively, while they hear alarming statements from U.S. officials to the effect that Assad should not go any time soon. From the perspective of the anti-Assad fighters, this amounts to telling them that if they win battles against IS their reward will be to go back and live under Assad, which is not a prospect likely to strengthen their morale or preserve their credibility in the eyes of the population or of more radical groups.

*Build capacity for the stabilisation of Syria*

At present none of the parties to the conflict has the capacity to enforce law and order on all of Syrian territory. The choice is not between chaos or partnering with an unsavoury regime because it can restore stability – it is between chaos and chaos if no coherent strategy is defined to restore order and provide security. The existence of such a capacity is an essential prerequisite for a political solution.

For the regime, IS's attacks on government forces since summer 2014 have resulted in humiliating losses for the army. They have traumatised Assad's constituency and demonstrated the regime's loss of military capability. The regime's ground forces have shrunk from 315,000 to roughly 150,000 troops (some sources put them as low as 60 000)[3] since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 (Kozak, 2014); its allies in Iraq, Lebanon and Tehran have partially compensated for this haemorrhage by forming sectarian-based militias with fighters from as far afield as Afghanistan and North Korea. The number of foreign fighters has grown to the point that one no longer sees very many purely Syrian army formations (White, 2014). Four generals from the Iranian Revolutionary Guads are said to have died in January-February 2015. When IS routed Iraqi forces in Mosul, however, thousands of Iraqi fighters were called back to Iraq. The regime's military forces are behaving increasingly like militias with only loose central command. They lay siege to areas, loot, kidnap men and women (sometimes fighters from the loyalist army), and commit crimes with the blessing of their commanders. In these conditions it is difficult to imagine how the regime would restore law and order in the areas that IS currently controls. If Assad's claim that he is the most suitable partner in the fight against IS were true, he is in a position to demonstrate this right now by stopping attacks on the non-jihadi opposition and turning his army against IS. He does not need to go to Geneva for this; indeed, he would immediately make a new Geneva possible.

An alternative capacity does not exist either among the opposition. To develop it would require that key regional players all commit to working in the same direction, which they have failed to do in four years. Only the U.S. can secure such a commitment from all its allies by drawing up a strategy and bringing them all into line, using the funds it

2 A survey of the civilian population's opinion in Aleppo on Special Envoy de Mistura's proposed "freeze plan" conducted in January 2015 indicates that 53% of inhabitants in the conflict zone favour a freeze, regardless of the consequences (ARI, 2015).

3 Ayman Abdennour, All4Syria.info, March 18th 2015 (in Arabic).

has decided to allocate to the "train and equip" programme to leverage serious funding from the Gulf monarchies to serve one unified strategy. A show of determination on the part of the U.S. would not be about fuelling the conflict, but about increasing the prospects for a political solution.

The "train and equip" programme is potentially a good scheme, but only if the selection process is revisited and the mission modified to include the fight against the regime's forces. Powerful groups of fighters are currently present on the ground. By excluding them all from the "train and equip" programme the U.S. would be creating a huge problem of potential spoilers. The small local groups numbering between 50 and no more than 500 men represent more than a third of opposition fighters. These are strongly embedded in their communities and have the support of the civilian population, but have never been able to grow in size or capacity for lack of stable support. In addition, over 2,500 officers who have defected from the Syrian army are sitting idle in refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan. They all yearn for a plan that would bring them together under one strategy, a plan that would serve as a magnet to rival that of IS or Jabhat el-Nusra. They understand the need to fight both IS and the regime, and many agree that the fight against IS could be a priority in many circumstances.

But there is an urgent need for opposition forces on the ground to clarify their position vis-à-vis Jabhat al-Nusra. For now, the U.S.-led international coalition should isolate IS as the only target of the air campaign. Pounding IS with bombs might work if the rest of the strategy is sound, i.e. if the end game is clear. While Jabhat al-Nusra is very close to IS and does not seem very different from al-Qa'ida, its relations with other groups is one of coexistence, because it fights the regime and has achieved significant successes against it that have bolstered its popularity and legitimacy. It therefore requires a distinct, more sophisticated strategy and more time. Some efforts led by Syrian political and religious leaders have been made to deradicalise al-Nusra fighters and coopt its leaders, with the ultimate aim of dividing and dismantling the organisation. If and when the U.S. begins to build a stabilisation force, it will be in a position to demand from the groups it supports that they abandon al-Nusra or experience the same fate as IS.

Analysts and diplomats involved in the Syrian conflict envisage the creation of a Syrian stabilisation force of 50,000 men within two to three years, with a mission to enforce law and order on the ground and combat any force that stands in its way.[4] Such a plan proposes to entrust a Syrian advisory task force with the responsibility of selecting reliable fighters to undergo a vetting process and ensure they remain dedicated to the force's mission. With a reliable Syrian partner, the U.S. would be able to identify a much larger pool of fighters from which to select combatants. The time frame may seem long, but the mere start of such a programme to which Syrians could relate and adhere could begin to change the dynamics on the ground. When the time comes for a meaningful negotiation process to address the security arrangements, this force – even if still in the making – will become part of the answer to the daunting questions of who will ensure security on the ground and how to avoid another Libya.

There would be an important role for the European Union to play in this context, particularly in the area of civil-military relations, policing, local governance, and the organisation of humanitarian support and as the return of refugees.

***Bringing regional players into line***

Regional powers that have been providing the means to opposition groups to fight the regime would need to commit to the implementation of a common strategy. They retain a strong capacity to shape the situation on the ground and rein in some of the most radical groups. To ensure that Turkey and the Gulf monarchies would cooperate in good faith, they need to be convinced that the end game is a genuine transition from the Assad regime and that the plan is not about strengthening Shia forces to weaken the Sunni character of Syria. For some years to come, such assurances can only come from the U.S.

In terms of the regime, Iran alone can decide on and plan the withdrawal of Hizbullah and Iraqi fighters, as well as its own commanders currently fighting in Syria. It may be interested in a bargain on Syria that will be influenced by its negotiations with the U.S. on its nuclear programme and a clear recognition of its role in Iraq. But like Russia, Iran has shown throughout the conflict that it will only reconsider its position when it believes that the U.S. has a strategy that increases the cost of its own involvement in Syria.

## Negotiating a political solution

The Geneva negotiations of January 2014 lasted two weeks altogether and failed to address any of the two key items on the agenda, fighting jihadism and establishing a transitional governing body, with the Syrian regime's delegation refusing to discuss any political change and giving exclusive priority to the anti-terror fight, while the opposition delegation remained committed to the June 2012 Geneva text that a new political actor – a transitional governing body – should be established before the fight against extremists can be waged effectively. Assad's fate was the elephant in the room. It was clear that the regime's delegation had no mandate to discuss anything beyond "fighting terrorists", which is the official line that Assad has clung to for four years. A last-minute suggestion by the UN mediator, Lakhdar Brahimi, to conduct two parallel tracks to address the two issues simultaneously was accepted by the opposition, but was rejected by the

4 The Atlantic Council will publish a report on a Syrian National Stabilisation Force in April 2015.

regime's delegation, leading Brahimi to announce the failure of the negotiations and to put the blame explicitly on the regime.

One year later the fight against IS has become a global priority. While the Syrian opposition acknowledges this reality, it sees the two problems as inextricably linked. Thus a negotiation that starts off on two parallel tracks, as suggested by Brahimi, remains a valid proposition.

Many in the opposition have come to understand that concessions will be needed for the sake of ensuring a safe future for the Alawite community, not to save Assad. There are many indications that the Alawite community is living out a tragedy, that the death toll among its male youth is intolerable, and that it lives in fear and isolation, convinced that it has no other choice but to fight for its survival. The close surveillance and crippling fear it experiences have effectively deterred members of the regime from engaging in meaningful contacts with the opposition. In order to secure the participation of influential figures from the regime any negotiation will have to be official and Assad will have to be forced by his allies to allow it according to an agreed agenda.

Given the complexity of the issues and the failures of past attempts, a negotiation process will necessarily take time. It should be convened without any publicity and held in a safe space where options can be discussed and ideas tested without risk to their proponents. A strong mediator and influential deal broker will be required. Thus a renewed Russian initiative would certainly be welcome, provided the Geneva document remains the framework of reference for the negotiation. Once they are engaged in the process, the parties might consider trade-offs and possible changes to the Geneva parameters, but not before.

It will be important to send out a clear message to all parties – and especially the fighters on both sides – that a process is starting which enjoys strong international support and that they may benefit from if they support it. This should help discipline the opposition and lay out options for the settlement.

***Opposition representation***

The divisions within the Syrian opposition have been a major source of frustration for Syrians and non-Syrians alike. Some are due to ideological differences, others to divergent views about the appropriate strategy to follow, but many result from parochial fights, partisan rivalries, and a lack of experience in organising collective action. The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) has never risen to the level of an organised front and is riven by regional influences that play on personal ambitions. The smaller National Coordination Commission for Democratic Change (NCCDC) is believed to have influence within the silent opposition inside Syria, but has hardly any contact with armed groups on the ground and is on the verge of breaking up. These divisions have undoubtedly served Assad's discourse about the absence of an alternative to himself. But while the opposition's weaknesses are real, it is also the absence of any operational strategy on the part of any combination of actors that has compounded its ineffectiveness. No path has ever been planned that could have given a sense of direction to the opposition and probably parts of the loyalists camp to mobilise either for military action, to engage in a serious political process or to follow the legal path to international justice.

The meeting of independent figures and representatives from the two main opposition coalitions (the SNC and NCCDC) in Cairo in January 2015 – who issued a ten-point statement ahead of the dialogue organised in Moscow – offers a promising model on which the opposition intends to build. A possible next step could be to organise a broad national conference in which all movements and parties, however small, are represented and agree on a common platform. The existence of such a national conference would serve to protect the negotiating team from regional interferences and would ensure the minimal political integrity of the process and the resulting transitional institutions.

A parallel effort would be to form a small team of experts with good negotiating skills who would be involved in a quiet negotiation process and would report back to the representatives of the national conference. These experts would not need to be representatives of any one section of Syrian society. Their role would be to untangle the various aspects of the conflict, agree on the sequencing of the negotiations and define compromise options on the difficult issues.

If, however, the national conference fails to produce a joint stance on negotiations, a de facto opposition might result from the two processes described above of building the stabilisation force, on the one hand, and developing the path of a negotiation process, on the other. These will operate as vetting processes in which only relevant figures committed to the political solution will be retained.

***Dealing with Assad***

That Assad's departure should not be a precondition is now accepted by the national coalition of the opposition. In a document released in early February 2014, the coalition describes the size, composition and roles of the transitional governing body without mentioning Assad's departure, signaling that it understands and accepts the rules of a workable negotiation. But there is a difference between maintaining Assad and his system unchanged, on the one hand, and keeping Assad in power for a given period of time until his departure can be scheduled as part of a planned democratic process based on constitutional mechanisms, on the other. The latter opens the way for a political solution that may resemble the transition plan for Yemen, while the former would amount to a return to the status quo ante, in other words the absence of a settlement.

*Getting the sequencing right: the military and security first*
The Assad system is best described as a securitocracy – a common model in the Arab world with weak political institutions that serve as a façade for an all-powerful military and security apparatus. Syria presents an added difficulty because the army and the security agencies are intertwined. The obvious implication of this is that the solution must start with the security sector.

The deal on key points of agreement that begin to untangle the conflict will need to be struck with key military, security and social leaders from the Alawite community based on a set of principles: firstly, a commitment by all stakeholders that a solution to the sectarian problem will never be sought by force; and, secondly, an acknowledgement that the sectarian concerns that characterise the conflict require special arrangements to ensure the security of all Syrians. This does not imply that the solution lies in power sharing on a sectarian basis. Special transitional arrangements would be agreed between the two negotiating parties that would guide the restructuring of the security apparatus only. The first joint committees to be established should be the military and security committees, whose task it will be to define the rules for the restructuring of the army and security agencies; the merging of the opposition forces with the regular army (the existence of a stabilisation force would facilitate this process); the decommissioning, disarmament and reintegration programme and all other aspects of security sector reform; and the priority areas for stabilisation force deployment, etc. Any sectarian considerations that are included should be provisional and limited to the security sector. This in turn will make it possible to design the other (civil) institutions of the transition (the constitution, the institutions of governance, the legislative system, local government, etc.) on the basis of equal citizenship. Syrians (including many in the Alawite community) are strongly opposed to power sharing on sectarian lines and do not want an Iraq-like settlement where the removal of the dictatorship led to the dismantling of the political entity.

In the process of designing the plan for the transformation of the security institutions, Syrian negotiators will need to carefully assess their capacities, discuss the extent to which they will need outside assistance and define the level of involvement of the international community that is needed to make an agreement implementable. In particular, they will have to decide whether an international peacekeeping force will be needed, as well as its mission and the geographic areas where it will have to be deployed.

*Withdrawal of foreign forces*
The withdrawal of foreign forces is a critical aspect of any security arrangement. It includes defining a schedule for their withdrawal and negotiating modalities and commitments by outside players. To the extent that governments that support the opposition can control what flows across their borders – in terms of money from the Gulf monarchies and fighters from Turkey – there are good reasons to believe that a coherent U.S. strategy led with determination will bring these governments into line and resolve an important part of the problem. As for the forces fighting alongside the regime, Iran is the key interlocutor to obtain the withdrawal of Hizbullah, Iraqi and other Shia fighters. If it is to be a full partner in a solution to the Syrian conflict, Tehran may find that an opposition-led government is willing to accommodate certain legitimate concerns, but Iran will also need to commit not to support the creation of a Hizbullah-like force in Syria, because this will mean a form of occupation by proxy, which is clearly not what would bring back stability to Syria. Once a plan exists to resolve the military and security issues, including the withdrawal of foreign forces, it will become possible to address the other aspects of a settlement. Chief among those are the following:

*A constitutional framework*
A constitutional framework is an essential part of the transition process, but it should be seen as an instrument to implement a political compromise rather than the entry point to a solution.This is why the four-point plan (a mere declaration rather than a plan) of spring 2014 proposed by the Iranian government does not seem applicable because it suggests redefining the prerogatives of the president and devolving more powers to the legislature, thus allowing Assad to remain in power with diminished powers. Several research projects (e.g. USIP, 2012) have discussed the various options for a constitution in the transition period, including using the existing constitution of 2012 after changing some of its problematic articles; reverting to the constitution of 1950, which Syrians say symbolises a democratic era in the history of the country; or drafting a new constitutional declaration that would symbolise a clear break with the past. Examples of other post-conflict or post-dictatorship contexts suggest that the use of the existing constitution to initiate the transition process has served to reassure the governing authorities that some continuity is respected, while serious changes are introduced to the text along the way, until a constituent assembly can draft a permanent constitution. It will be interesting to see what political system Syrians eventually choose. While some see the need for a strong president at the head of the executive as the best option to bring back stability, others are wary of the past concentration of power in the hands of one leader and call for a parliamentary system. All agree that strong checks and balances on the powers of the president will be necessary. The creation of a Higher Assembly (or a Senate) is also under discussion as a body that would ensure better representation and guarantees for minorities.

*Decentralisation*
Decentralisation, while it appears to be of a technical and administrative nature, is in essence a highly political question. The opposition has gradually come to acknowledge that the new aspirations and changes on the ground over the last four years require a reorganisation of the governance system and the distribution of power that would retain the country and all its citizens within its

current boundaries. To reassure Kurds and encourage the moderates among them, the earlier the issue is addressed the better. Negotiators will need to explore models of decentralisation and their political, social, economic and security implications, so that a peace agreement contains precise policy options for a peaceful reorganisation of the Syrian system of governance that recognises the diversity of Syrian society, the emergence of local councils as a healthy development and the need to devolve power to the local level as an essential part of democratisation.

*Reconstruction and the return of refugees*

Reconstruction and the return of refugees will require several years and massive foreign assistance. It will need to be based on a sound distribution of responsibilities and funds among central government, local governance structures, community-based structures and other civil society organisations. Failing that, the return of corruption, bad governance and marginalisation is a certainty.

*Transitional justice programme*

A transitional justice programme is a moral and political necessity and should be placed at the core of any peace plan. But many Syrians who wish to see the transition as a period to heal wounds rightly believe that Syrian society cannot afford to implement a justice programme any time soon. Nevertheless, it is vital to formulate a plan for a comprehensive transitional justice programme, most of which should be scheduled for implementation at a later date when transitional institutions are in place and security is guaranteed for all. In parallel, an amnesty deal should be made part of the negotiation process with criteria and mechanisms of accountability to be agreed between the parties (ARI, 2014). Although a comparison of numbers shows the regime being responsible for an overwhelmingly higher level of crimes, setting these criteria for both sides of the conflict will provide a strong enough incentive for rebels to accept the idea of amnesty out of fear of their own fighters being prosecuted.

*Stopping the fighting*

We have deliberately left the question of a ceasefire out of our analysis so far. This is not to suggest that a ceasefire would only occur after agreeing on a full plan, nor that attempts at reaching a freeze as proposed by the UN special envoy for Aleppo are not useful. On the contrary, they should be relentlessly pursued to stop the suffering as soon as possible. But experience has shown in many conflicts (and in Syria with the various failed attempts of the last four years) that the parties tend to ignore or easily violate a ceasefire as long as they do not see that a political settlement is a serious possibility. Thus we consider that a ceasefire (whether partial or total) will become possible as soon as a credible diplomatic process is under way.

*Time frame*

It is both difficult and necessary to define a time frame for the implementation of all stages of a peace plan even before having an indication of the successful completion of each step. However, the complications that will inevitably arise should not be ignored or glossed over for the sake of respecting a schedule, because this will lead to failure. The process will need to draw on the lessons of the mistakes in the peacebuilding processes in Iraq, Yemen and Libya, where half-baked measures, the lack of stabilisation plans and flawed security arrangements came back to explode in the face of those who had designed them.

## Conclusion

The challenge of a peace process may well represent a more serious threat to Assad than the continuation of the conflict. If Assad's close aides and his community want him out of power, they will have the opportunity to voice their position. If they continue to support him, it will be an indication that the country needs more preparation before the head of the system can be replaced. But for the positive dynamics of politics to play out, the Assad brothers, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hizbullah must be prevented from disrupting or undermining the process. First and foremost, a peace plan must ensure that the regime and its allied forces on the ground cease to have exclusive control over the security apparatus and that the different steps of the process are arranged in the correct sequence.

After experiencing mass crimes against humanity, Syrians certainly want justice, but they are willing to forgive and turn the page on many horrors. They are therefore ready for many compromises to save their country from collapse or partition. They will not forget, but they can wait for transitional justice if they know that it will come later, after a healing period.

Among opposition figures, many realise that they will have to agree to a deal that does not satisfy all their aspirations. But repeating publicly that Assad needs to stay in power otherwise there will be no Syria is not likely to help. This rationale amounts to an endorsement of the slogan launched by the most extremist figures of the regime ("Assad, or we will burn the country"). In the meantime the conflict has gradually turned into a de facto occupation of the country by IS, on the one hand, and by Iran and the forces under its command, on the other. The Assad that many countries want to hold on to as a necessary partner is no more than the shadow of his former self and commands very little power to either fight IS or deliver security.

It is difficult to imagine that the insecurity generated by the Syrian situation can be left without an adequate response. Without a coherent U.S.-designed strategy, European countries, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies find themselves facing threats that Washington does not face. They have every reason to feel entitled to start a crisis management process of their own, one that goes beyond the mere containment of jihadis.

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"Syrian voices on the Syrian conflict" is a series of papers commissioned by NOREF and swisspeace to provide space for Syrians to share opinions, display their different perspectives about the situation, and shed some light on the efforts to end the violence. The objective is to allow for diversity and pluralism of opinions throughout the different papers. The content in this series reflect the perspective of their respective authors and not the opinions of NOREF or swisspeace.


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