

Report

Analysis: Continued Marginalization of Syrians is Key Problem

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Syrians in Dael, Daraa reiterate the demand they've made since the start of the revolution: the Assad regime must go [Alaa Faqir/Reuters]

Abstract

To expect that a limited cessation of hostilities brokered by the US and Russia will miraculously allow Geneva III talks to proceed and create a tangible and feasible solution for Syria is overly-hopeful and irresponsible analysis at best, first and foremost because Syrians inside Syria have been and continue to be marginalized throughout this process, and second because any plan keeping Assad in power will only prolong the conflict. In particular, all proposed solutions to Syria have largely ignored the work being done in the country by local councils and civil society organizations to provide services to citizens in liberated areas. This analysis examines reviving Geneva III given the current political and military context and pinpoints the “forced silencing” of domestic Syrian voices in internationally-brokered agreements and projects (humanitarian and political alike) as a key impediment to the implementation of any future plans for the country. The analysis concludes with an examination of the possible scenarios awaiting Syria, with an emphasis that partitioning Syria is an “easy way out,” one that is temporary at best.

Not the first time

On 26 February 2016, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) announced the unanimous adoption of Resolution 2268 (2016) in support of the Syria ceasefire agreement announced by the United States and Russia. This resolution is at least the sixteenth one adopted by the United Nations regarding Syria since the Syrian revolution began, in addition to six UNSC Presidential Statements on the situation in Syria. This ceasefire agreement is the seventh UN-brokered agreement for a ceasefire in Syria, joining an overall total of eighteen truces which were eventually broken in Syria since the revolution began. After one day of relative calm, Russian jets and Assad cannons

returned to striking rural areas of Hama, Aleppo and Idlib on the morning of 28 February 2016, not even 48 hours after the ceasefire went into effect. It is true there have been less attacks after the ceasefire was put into place, but the reality is that there are at least six areas across the country which remain under a crippling regime siege without humanitarian aid,(1) and that's aside from regime and Russian airstrikes that continue to kill civilians, albeit at a lesser rate than before.

Past UN attempts to force all parties to agree to cessation of hostilities in Syria have been a failure mostly because they have been half-hearted attempts which throw blame on the opposition without seriously bringing the Assad regime or its allies to account for its war crimes inside the country. For example, even the fanfare made about the UN's programme to remove chemical weapons from the possession of the Assad regime was later found to be more protocol than reality in terms of protecting civilians.(2) Furthermore, the UN's actions inside Syria have often been to the benefit of the regime, buying it more time to kill, starve and destroy,(3) in turn making both the internal and external opposition wonder how they could possibly trust a process which is being overseen by this very same organization, the UN, which is supposed to be acting as an unbiased international broker of peace.

This report examines reviving Geneva III in the current context, pinpoints the deliberate silencing of domestic Syrian voices on the international level as a key impediment in any internationally-brokered ceasefires and examines the future scenarios for Syria in the context of an imperfect "ceasefire" and John Kerry's statement that partitioning Syria was a possibility if the ceasefire failed.(4) The bottom line is that with everyone but Syrians deciding the fate of Syria, it will be very difficult for any proposed solution to hold for any significant period of time.

Reviving Geneva?

During the meeting to adopt Resolution 2268(2016), the UN Secretary-General's Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, stated in a remote briefing from Geneva that if the ceasefire went well, he would attempt to reconvene the Geneva III talks on 7 March. Given the opposition's hesitation after the ceasefire began, De Mistura later said it would be more likely the talks would reconvene 10 March.(5) Most recently, the talks were pushed to 14 March. With the original meeting which had been set for 29 January 2016, it took less than a week after that date for the opposition's Higher Negotiating Committee (HNC) to abandon the Geneva III talks altogether, particularly given the regime and Russia's refusal to agree to the immediate implementation of articles 12 and 13 of UNSC Resolution 2254, which called on all parties to allow unfettered humanitarian access to all areas of Syria and demanded that all attacks on civilians immediately cease, respectively.

In fact, rather than accept this premise to proceed with Geneva III, the regime's UN representative, Bashar al-Ja'fari, said to reporters, 'First of all, there will be no negotiations. We are here for indirect talks, in the shape of "Syrian-Syrian" dialogue, without preconditions and without foreign intervention...Memorize this, it's the opening chapter of our Quran'.⁽⁶⁾ This statement was rather ironic given the regime's continued reliance on not only Iran and Russia, but also the US-classified terrorist group, the Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as Iranian-backed Shia militias. In order to hang on to power, the Assad regime has continued to back away from accepting responsibility for its role in the death and destruction across Syria, instead constantly peddling the narrative that it is fighting terrorism. Unfortunately, the international community has played right into this narrative, examining the future of Syria through the lens of two options: Assad or the Islamic State terrorist organization.

Following Russian escalation of air strikes on northern Syria in the days leading to the 29 January Geneva III meeting, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia made moves that pulled them more directly into the conflict as well. While Saudi's contribution was more limited to offers to send special forces to Syria to fight IS (and not the Assad regime) if invited by the US, Turkey began striking YPG targets in northern Syria given the YPG's advances under Russian air cover. For Turkey, once the YPG began to advance on the border town of Azaz after taking Menagh air base, the threat of the town, and subsequently Aleppo, falling, became all too real, becoming a "national security threat" for Turkey.⁽⁷⁾

The "forced absenteeism" of the Syrian people

For Geneva III to work, there has to be a fundamental change in the way Syrians living inside Syria are viewed by the international community. Starting November 2015, there had been renewed attempts by the US, the UN and Saudi to address the downward spiral in Syria. However, one common theme that emerged from all the meetings that took place was the absence of representation for civil society and local councils that have emerged in liberated areas of the country.

One such example is the "Supporting Syria and the Region" conference held 4 February 2016, in London. It was co-hosted by the UK, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the UN; however, Syrian civil society activists invited to speak said in their speeches that they did not receive an invitation until the very last minute, and were not involved in planning the agenda for the conference or identifying key goals for addressing Syria's humanitarian disaster.⁽⁸⁾ While this meeting was meant to be a civil society and humanitarian aid exercise, it did not involve Syrians who were on the ground, and is only a small example, out of many, how Syrian voices have been marginalized by the international community.

Even during the Riyadh meeting in December 2015, which was sponsored by the so-called Friends of Syria, the concentration was on political and military representatives of the opposition. No civil society groups were in attendance in that capacity, and policymakers seemed to agree with this sentiment, 'On the ground in Syria, the armed groups fighting Assad are the only ones that truly matter to the outcome of the conflict'.⁽⁹⁾ While this statement holds weight because armed groups have their weapons to speak for them if all else fails, as compared to other groups on the ground, the reality is that there are over 400 democratically-elected local councils across Syria which provide Syrians in liberated areas with services, coordinate aid distribution with international and local NGOs and act as liaisons between armed groups when there is a dispute or need for security and protection. To continue to ignore this network of civil society will not bring about any long-term solutions for Syria, political or otherwise.

Furthermore, even during the cessation of hostilities agreement, it quickly became clear the US State Department's mechanism to report violations, which was supposedly directed at Syrian citizens living inside, was highly problematic.⁽¹⁰⁾ Syrians who called to report violations found that the person on the other end had limited Arabic skills and was barely able to understand them.

Perhaps one of the most clear examples of the marginalization of the Syrian people has been in the media. On Friday, 4 March, as well as Friday, 11 March, Syrians in Daraa, Idlib, Hama, rural Damascus gathered in mass peaceful protests, asking for the fall of the regime. While Syrians had been doing this on a smaller scale even before the cessation of hostilities, these mass protests have been covered by the media as if it is the first time since 2011 that Syrians have gathered to demand freedom, the fall of the regime and their basic human rights. Headlines have read, 'Hundreds Across Syria protest against Assad for the first time in years',⁽¹¹⁾ and, 'For a day, Syria's cease-fire revives peaceful protest',⁽¹²⁾ and, 'Syrians resume peaceful street protest'.⁽¹³⁾ There is definitely a case to be made that protests were wider in scope after the cessation of hostilities, but those seriously following the Syrian revolution know that these protests never stopped, regardless of how bad intense attacks became on civilian areas.

Possibilities for Syria

To continue to reduce what is happening in Syria to a "conflict", a "civil war" or "a war on terror" detracts from the reality of Syria in early 2011 and is a serious oversimplification. It is undeniable there was a people's revolution in Syria which called first for reforms, and then for a regime change when Assad and his allies responded with violent repression. At this point, the most honest assessment of what is happening in Syria is that there are those who still fight for the revolution, but that Syria's soil has now also been transformed into a battleground where global actors are settling scores

between each other, almost completely ignoring the root of the problem: the Assad regime.

It is indeed true that Iran and Russia are aggressors in Syria; that Kurdish, Iraqi and other militias have committed human rights violations in Syria; that Hezbollah has maintained its military support for the regime; and that IS (Daesh or the Islamic State) has continued to fight not only opposition groups, but also civil society groups and individuals in the areas that it has captured. Yet, the Assad regime that created the environment in which groups like Daesh flourished, and the regime that accepted and invited military support from Iran and Russia, as well as foreign militias, continues to exist unfettered, every few months signing new weapons contracts with Russia under the international community's nose or striking civilian areas with barrel bombs until it has become normal to hear of these attacks.

Alarming, many political analysts have fallen into the trap of examining the situation with the assumption that the original demands of the revolution are not still valid, which is not the reality. There is a tendency to reduce Syria to the latest case study in Jihadist movements, but this ignores local activists on the ground, the local councils and the Syrian civil society that is flourishing despite attacks by the regime, Russia, Iran and the Islamic State. Weekly civilian protests organized inside Syria are one of many indicators that Syrians have not given up on their revolution or the demand that Assad must go. Since the start of the latest ceasefire, opposition groups have organized peaceful protests on a much larger scale in Dael, Daraa, in Idlib, in Aleppo, in Homs, Latakia and rural Damascus, carrying what has become a famous slogan of the revolution, 'Let's start at the beginning. We want the fall of the regime'.

Even the HNC's acceptance of the latest ceasefire, despite its reservations, is further evidence that throwing the blame on the opposition is just an excuse for the international community's shortfalls in stopping Assad, Iran and Russia from committing war crimes against the Syrian people. Agreeing to a ceasefire when the other side has consistently broken all past ceasefires is a yet another desperate attempt by the opposition to illustrate that they are serious about removing Assad but that the international community has shirked its obligations in this regard, and will obviously continue to do so.

The revolution is in danger, yes, and the armed opposition has lost ground in both southern and northern Syria in recent months. The possible division of Syria has become a reality that can no longer be ignored. Efforts by the regime and its allies to forcefully displace residents (particularly Sunni residents) or starve them to death, such as in Madaya, is helping shift Syria's demographic structure and gives regime forces or their

allies the upper hand in strategic areas of rural Damascus, Homs, Latakia and Aleppo provinces.

Thus, the first possibility is that Syria will be partitioned into pieces, and this is likely not only given the refugee and internally displaced exodus, but also given the reality that the Islamic State (IS or Daesh) continues to control large swathes of Syrian territory. That is aside from the institutional and economic breakdowns which have occurred across the country. Thus, maintaining a single country would be an undertaking of epic proportions, one that would require more than the international community has illustrated it is willing to give over the last five years. However, the international community must be aware that partitioning is an option that is temporary and one that does not resolve anything but who controls what areas of Syria. It will not allow for redevelopment or a unified approach to governance that would rebuild sorely lacking public institutions. A partitioned Syria will threaten even further the stability of its neighbours, particularly Iraq, because if Syria is split up, Iraq will likely follow.

Another variable which points to the partitioning of Syria are the movements by governments and policymakers to make Syrian refugee camps “more permanent”.⁽¹⁴⁾ Aside from crippling movement into Turkey through the remaining border crossings of Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salama, Turkey’s President Erdogan has been hinting for several months at the creation of a so-called safe zone in northern Syria, one which would even return Syrian refugees settled in Turkey to this area.⁽¹⁵⁾ Even more telling is the latest EU-Turkey deal on refugees, which has been labelled “one-in-one-out” and would send Syrian refugees arriving in Europe back to Turkey without any consideration for their asylum claims, in exchange for resettlement of one Syrian refugee currently living in Turkey. This is aside from the agreed-upon monetary aid by the EU to Turkey for refugees and visa-free travel for Turkish citizens to the Schengen countries.⁽¹⁶⁾

The second possibility is that the ceasefire continues to unravel, but at a slower pace as Assad, Iranian and Russian forces pause to regroup and attempt to give themselves the upper hand in any future internationally-brokered negotiations. Not only will this mean continued fighting, but it will also mean that the number of refugees will continue to rise, and Syria’s infrastructure will continue to be destroyed. The stalemate that this will create will not be very different than the scenario that has continued over the last five years. Moreover, without a no-fly zone, the death toll will continue to increase. This scenario, which is the one that seems to be the international community’s second choice after partitioning, allows the continuation of forcing Syrians to choose between the Islamic State (IS) and Assad, as well as fortifies the “war on terror” argument that was originally perpetuated by the Assad regime as justification for attacking civilians.

Part of this second scenario that cannot be ignored is the presence of al-Nusra Front as well. Al-Qaeda’s arm in Syria, the group branded as a terrorist organization by western

countries and by the Etilaf (external opposition). The reality is that this group has played a large role in key battles, particularly in northern Syria. It was part of the coalition which liberated Idlib, and it is part of the battles to save Aleppo from falling into the regime's hands. It now plays a role in running the city of Idlib after its liberation. The group has been accused of human rights and freedoms violations in liberated areas, and continues to be problematic for both Syrians inside Syria and for the international community. Should the group disassociate itself with al-Qaeda, some of its members would likely join the Islamic State, while others would join groups like Ahrar al-Sham, meaning that the group's future in Syria would be shaky at best. But if it does not, it will continue to be a problem all involved parties (domestic and foreign) must address, either by pressuring it further to break with al-Qaeda, or by finding a way to negotiate directly or indirectly with the group, as the international community has now been forced to do with the Taliban in Afghanistan.(17)

To limit the options in Syria to these two aforementioned scenarios guarantees an increasingly complicated country that will have implications for the entire region. There is a third possibility, one which is widely ignored by the international community. International actors could potentially shift their focus from failed political solutions, to investing in local councils as an alternative to partitioning the country. Training local councils in public administration would be a much better investment in a future unified and stable Syria than the current humanitarian aid which, in many cases, is indirectly backing the Assad regime and areas under its control. An opposition that is based mainly outside of Syria cannot possibly solve the Syrian crisis, and Russia and the US cannot be the main brokers of a "peace policy" when there are Syrians inside Syria who have illustrated they are far more adept at running their country with limited resources – in fact, these councils are concentrated in the areas which are run by the opposition in Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Rural Damascus, and Daraa.(18) Working in the context of shelling, internal disputes and security challenges, these local councils have managed to pursue both services (medical, water, etc.)(19) and civil society projects (cultural centres, journalism training, etc.).(20)

The reality is that the actors inside Syria currently are across the spectrum, from entire nations to international terrorist organizations, and there is no easy solution, and no analyst can claim to predict for sure what the coming year will bring for the country. However, to continue to throw blame on the opposition, without acknowledging the administrative, political and military work that Syrians inside Syria are doing, means that there will be no permanent solution for the country anytime in the near future.

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