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Syria – Avoiding a Dangerous Disconnect

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The Syrian war is characterized by a complex mix of interests, fears and grievances involving people and groups both inside and outside of Syria. In such a context, attempts to achieve a military victory cannot resolve the underlying causes of the conflict and provide the basis for long term peace and stability, but would instead lead to the de facto physical and societal fragmentation of Syria. They would lead to a re-escalation of hostilities and a continuation of the regional conflict between Sunni and Shi'a with massive adverse consequences for the region and beyond.

In any analysis of the Syrian conflict, a political settlement is the only viable way to peace. Concerted efforts have been made to set a new round of political talks in motion, but the complexity of the conflict poses daunting challenges for peacemakers trying to forge the basis for a solution. There are four major challenges: building empathy into the political process, managing high levels of fragmentation and mistrust, minimizing the political space for radical groups, and building political leadership.

Building empathy into the political process

An empathic approach involves efforts to get inside the minds of those a political process should serve, and adapting the process accordingly. It means devoting time, energy and resources to acquiring a deep appreciation of the range of Syrian thought processes, motivations and perspectives. Arriving at a settlement for Syria will take political will and diplomatic brinkmanship. But it will not work in practice unless it builds on a deep engagement, understanding and empathy with the people and groups concerned and an awareness of their psychological and social experience.

The disconnect between a political settlement and the realities on the ground was evident in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Developments in those two countries are the clearest indicators that we have to do something differently in the case of Syria. A political settlement must necessarily take the form of an international and regional geo-political compromise. But it must *also* build on a complex understanding of and engagement with people and groups on the ground. Its design and implementation must adapt to the realities on the ground and be informed by empathy in order to increase the chances of success.

A first challenge for diplomats is that there is not one conflict in Syria, there are several. The rebellion of Syrians against an oppressive regime and the Syrian regime's success in turning the

uprising into a sectarian conflict is at the base of the war. But now Syria is also the scene of a regional Sunni–Shi'a conflict, the Kurds are increasingly exploring their own territorial and political ambitions, and ISIS has created a safe haven for extremism in their so-called Caliphate.

To get political talks started, the primary focus is on fighting ISIS and bringing the international and regional sides on board, because without some kind of deal on regional interests there can be no peace in Syria. In any case, only Iran and Russia can force the Assad regime – the main obstacle to peace – into real talks. From the outset, the risk is that political efforts are top-down and disproportionately focused on the interests of external actors. The risk is that the grievances, interests and fears of everyday Syrians could be neglected – creating a dangerous disconnect between a political agreement and the realities on the ground.

Building empathy into the political process is therefore a key element in developing a settlement that will work on the ground. A priority for the international community is to avoid taking a blue-print approach. To achieve stabilization, the focus should be less on what, in our eyes, *should be,* but on what *could be,* as seen through the eyes of Syrians. The challenge is also to rein in the West's tendency to import elements of stabilization, such as democracy, and a particular system of government, from the outside and top-down, rather than building it from the inside and bottom-up. Successful implementation of a political agreement will require the ability to see things 'from the other side' and to build nuanced responses into a deal based on a realistic understanding of local dynamics.

Overcoming fragmentation and mistrust

Syria is already now fragmented into at least five territorial entities: the regime-held western zones of the country, the Kurdish areas in the north and northeast, the rebels in the northwest around Idlib and Aleppo, the rebels in the south and around Damascus, and ISIS in the east and the center of the country.

A simple top down agreement involving a new constitution and national-level structure of governance will never, in itself, reunite these entities. Neither will it enable the forging of a military alliance between rebels and the Syrian regime army that will ultimately be necessary to defeat ISIS in Syria.

Building a new Syria, given the current level of fragmentation, needs a level of trust and reconciliation. For that to happen, Bashar al-Assad has to go. As long as Assad and his inner core remains in power there can be no trust. Assad will never enter into an equitable deal with the rebels and opposition, nor give up his vast repressive apparatus on which his power solely depends. Syrians will not trust a political solution with Assad remaining in power – and that includes many on the regime side. No armed faction would lay down its weapons; rather, they would opt for retrenching themselves in their own fiefdoms. Syrians inside the country would move or be forced into what would inevitably become sectarian enclaves. Therefore, as long as Assad stays, Syria is likely to look more like a warlord-led failed and fragmented state than a country emerging from war – irrespective of any provisions in a political agreement. In any case, empathy must work both ways. International policy-makers and opposition leaders must empathize with minorities and it is essential that their rights and safety are provided for in any future political arrangements.

Rebuilding Syria also requires strong buy-in by the armed groups with power on the ground – and they need to cooperate amongst themselves. These groups are crucial for establishing security and law and order at the local level, which is likely to be ordinary Syrians' first priority. The challenge is *not* to limit inclusion according to our own narrow definition of 'moderates', as the Syrian regime and its Russian and Iranian allies want, but rather to bring as many of the armed groups as possible into the political process. All but ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusrah, which have been proscribed by the UN Security Council, should be included in a process that will help to pull the groups involved towards the political center. Inevitably, there will be spoilers who will try to sabotage or exploit the political process. It is crucial to limit the number of spoilers, and to secure the involvement of groups that can handle spoilers and thereby reduce their ability to sabotage the process. To manage such a process, to steer it in the right direction – especially in the likely absence of a large international stabilization force – will take considerable engagement, understanding and empathy.

Reducing the space for radicalism

Another major challenge to a political process is radicalization and the potential for radical groups to sabotage or overrun the peace process. In times of war, the political views of people under severe strain and experiencing deprivation always become more polarized and almost never become more moderate. Being 'Islamist' in wartime is not necessarily an indicator of real radicalization in terms of violent and terrorist ambitions. If a political process progresses, the key moment is the transition from war to stabilization. At that time, people will be looking for an arrangement that brings them personal security and provides for their basic needs. All too often, radical groups succeed in establishing 'parallel governments' that deliver security and basic services at the local level, which ultimately undermines transitional authority at the national level. An approach to transition in Syria that is too top down, neglecting these key dynamics at the local level – that neglects the people of Syria – could easily fail and open the space for competing alternatives offered by radical groups.

To address this risk, there first must be a strong focus on creating security for ordinary people at the local level. This should be done as early as possible. Realistically, the existing armed groups will be the only actors who can provide such security, but there will always be a risk of usurpation of power and fragmentation. In the absence of an international stabilization force, it is only armed groups themselves that can prevent any single armed group from acting in an unjust, abusive or predatory way. A collegial 'Military Council' of armed groups should be established, linked to the nucleus of a new Syrian national army, to form an effective control mechanism. This should include an effective channel for complaints.

Today, if Syrians in opposition areas are physically assaulted, forced to pay bribes or otherwise mistreated by members of an armed group, or cannot resolve a problem through the courts, they typically have few alternatives other than to turn to a rival armed group to resolve the matter. This helps to explain the growth in support for radical groups, such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusrah, which have championed grievances against corruption and abuse of power and emphasize the provision of local level security. It is therefore crucial that citizens have an effective recourse of complaint within the security system itself, as well as to the judiciary, so that effective action is taken against infractions. A collaborative Military Council could help to establish the necessary checks and balances against the misconduct of any one group.

Second, the delivery of basic services at the local level, organized from the center, is a key element in preventing radical groups from gaining a foothold in the population. The usual way of meeting the humanitarian and stabilization needs of the population would be direct delivery by international NGOs or by international organizations, such as the UN. The drawback of this approach is that it creates yet another parallel system to a transitional government and to local government entities (municipalities). This does not help to strengthen a transitional system; in fact, it undermines it. Visible and effective service delivery in cooperation with and effected through local public institutions is the only way to boost a national government's relevance and positive visibility among the population. For all its weaknesses, this approach is considerably cheaper and more sustainable – and in the longer run, it would probably turn out to be more effective, too.

Promoting civilian democratic leadership

Another challenge is the approach to establishing a democratic government, which is so often at the core of a political settlement to end civil war. There is a crucial difference between installing democracy from the top down by simply importing a democratic electoral system – most likely preceded by a transitional government with little or no popular legitimacy – and the building of democracy from the bottom up. At the very least, such processes should complement each other to build legitimacy into a new political system.

As it is, hardly any Syrian politician can claim to have legitimacy among the Syrian population. Many rebel leaders who had legitimacy have been killed by the regime. Syria has never experienced democracy or had any meaningful political dialogue involving the population. Politicians in the Middle East tend to do little campaigning, because the outcomes of elections are often determined by other factors. The challenge is to bridge this disconnect between the people and those seeking to govern. In most stabilization processes, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, the people were barely involved in defining the political future of the country – all was decided from outside or at the top. This creates a fertile ground for alternative, more extreme, mindsets at the local level.

To avoid this, first, a broad and extensive national dialogue must form the core of democracy building. A so-called 'national dialogue' is often conducted as one or a series of high-level consultations between power-holders in a country. As such, they have tended to take the form of discussions about power sharing between elites, rather than as an engagement between politicians and the people. A 'bottom-up' national dialogue would enable Syrian politicians to share their thoughts and ideas for a new Syria with the population at large, to solicit their responses and to build an understanding of what democracy can offer. Such a process needs to take place over an extended period and through thousands of meetings at the local level, in villages and towns. Such meetings should involve several political groups at once, which is the key difference between a national dialogue and a traditional political campaign.

This type of extensive bottom-up political engagement is rare and would be the best way for leaders to create the connection between themselves and the population that is virtually always lacking in a post-dictatorial state. It would do more than anything else to build a popular demand for a say in political decision-making, to strengthen the legitimacy of political leaders (as compared to the leaders of armed groups) and to bridge sectarian divides. In other contexts even the most uneducated people in rural areas have demonstrated a strong interest in being involved in decisions that directly affect their lives. This is just one of the reasons that local political dialogue

can contribute to a 'culture of democracy' and help bring greater legitimacy to the political system as a whole.

Second, there is a balance to be struck between achieving stability and building a civilian democratic government, which requires a strong level of international engagement. The leaders of armed groups will be crucial for establishing the security and stability that is essential for any political deal to work. The only way to ensure that the leaders of the armed groups are part of the political process, and not spoilers of it, is to ensure that they are involved in the post-war political system from the very early stages and to give them a sense of ownership of it. The challenge is to avoid this becoming just another autocratic system or even a new military dictatorship. Steering the process in the right direction and maintaining inclusivity will require innovative ways of strengthening the legitimacy of political leaders in the population and the establishment of systems of accountability and civil-military checks and balances. It will also require a whole new framework for political deliberations and procedures that include both military and civilian leaders.

Stabilization is not a choice

These are just a few of many challenges in establishing a political process in Syria. It underscores the need to move from a 'blueprint approach' to stabilization and transition, to an approach built on empathy and on pragmatic innovation, which is much more adapted to the situation on the ground and the people and actors involved. It should reflect the concerns of ordinary Syrians and be built on a deep appreciation of their situation, outlooks, fears and aspirations.

The international community has no alternative but to engage in efforts to bring about a political settlement for Syria and support its implementation. The stakes are incredibly high, and the conflict is not only about Syria. The Syrian war has put neighboring countries in a state of deep crisis and has spurred a regional conflict that has displaced more than 13.5 million people at a cost the international humanitarian community is struggling to meet. Without stabilization in Syria, record high levels of migration to Europe, with all its implications, will continue to increase. The conflict has set off a region-wide economic slowdown that threatens stability in the wider region and could trigger new conflicts. Not least, ISIS has emerged as a massive dark force in the ungoverned space between Syria and Iraq, and the group cannot be effectively fought before the conflict inside Syria is resolved.

The costs of a prolonged conflict in Syria or it becoming a failed state are simply too high in terms of the spill-over of terrorism and instability, of refugees and migration, and of economic stagnation and other conflicts. The question is therefore not *whether* the international community should engage in Syria, but rather one of *how*.

Empathy is of course not the sole answer to the Syrian conflict, but it is an important tool for understanding the people involved. Through such knowledge empathy can help to generate more effective and sustainable policies, and ultimately improve the prospects for peace.