

The United Nations and a peace process strategy for Syria

By Leila Hilal

■ Executive summary

The counterterrorism effort launched by the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition has side-tracked international attention away from a political resolution to the Syrian civil war. Officials, analysts and peace practitioners alike are latching on to quick fixes aimed at mitigating violence at the local level. Although stakeholders are mindful of the need to match bottom-up de-escalation efforts with top-down interventions, a comprehensive approach is as elusive as ever. The United Nations (UN) secretary-general's appointment of a new special envoy for Syria presents an opportunity for building an inclusive peacemaking strategy for the country. This policy brief provides a series of recommendations for the development of a strategy led by the UN with support from key countries.

Introduction

The appointment of the third special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, follows the resignation of former envoys Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi. Both the latter were seasoned diplomats. Brahimi held the post the longest, serving for nearly two years and presiding over the only direct talks held between the Syrian government and the formal opposition in early 2014. The talks, based on the Geneva Communiqué adopted by the international Action Group for Syria in June 2012, failed to produce common understandings between the parties or a change in the status quo. Brahimi subsequently resigned, blaming proxy warfare and international and regional discord.

De Mistura has embraced three priorities of comparative modesty: "anything to contribute to reduce the level of violence, anything we can do to increase the access of aid even across the borders and inside Syria, and promote the political process" (Sputnik International, 2014).

Since outlining these priorities, de Mistura has been promoting a plan to freeze military hostilities in areas of Syria ("freeze zones"), beginning with the highly contested Aleppo governorate and working "bottom-up" (BBC, 2014). Following his second visit to Damascus, the Assad government indicated that it might accept the proposal while opposition representatives have expressed reservations or rejected it.

An agreement to cease fire in Aleppo could bring some much-needed relief to Syrians fatigued by war. But a partial de-escalation of violence would not fill the political vacuum, which the Islamic State (IS) and other armed factions have been exploiting.

A negotiation pause is warranted. The U.S.-led military campaign in Iraq and Syria marks the convergence of anti-jihadist interests among external powers fuelling the Syrian civil war. These interests could be leveraged into a deal to force leading warring parties to accept a political transition and a complete end to armed hostilities. The five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany (P5+) are best placed to shepherd a deal.

Sufficient Syrian national consensus will, however, be needed for a durable resolution to the conflict. The UN special envoy is the appropriate interlocutor to begin building the foundations for productive Syrian negotiations while feeding into international and regional diplomacy for a grand bargain. de Mistura should adopt and pursue a peace process support strategy in parallel to his efforts to freeze fighting in certain locales.

The role of the special envoy: learning from the past

The failure of the Geneva II talks can be attributed to poor timing, the exclusion of key Syrian representatives and an inappropriate format. The talks were convened 18 months after the constituting document – the Geneva Communiqué – was agreed. The interim period saw a continuation of international policies to either arm disparate insurgent forces or back the Assad government at all costs, which precluded the diplomacy needed to shore up regional and global agreement for a transition.

The talks were convened under intense media scrutiny, with Russia and the U.S. holding competing visions of their purpose. Iran was invited and then disinvited after U.S. intervention. The lack of international and regional coordination contributed to mismatched party expectations. Conventional narratives of Geneva II failings have tended to overlook implicit compromises offered by the National Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). But the Assad government came unprepared and unwilling to discuss transitional issues and the SOC was unwilling to diverge to other topics. As Brahimi stated, the Syrian parties at the table were both still convinced of their ability to achieve victory.

UN mediation in the interim period was also missing. While the special envoy undertook shuttle diplomacy with states and consulted international organisations working on the ground, no serious steps were taken to create a forum to engage armed actors or lead mediation inside Syria. Moreover, Brahimi reportedly refused the participation of civil society representatives at the talks, including a women's delegation. These terms and conditions left the Geneva II process disconnected from local realities, and without broad legitimacy or popular support. This in turn further limited the negotiating parties.

A renewed plan for UN diplomacy

Four concentric circles of influence underpin the Syrian conflict: local, national, regional and global. The outer two rings (regional and global) have received the greater focus of analytical and diplomatic attention. While all four spheres are intertwined, a peace process support strategy that works from the inside out and back again would constitute a fresh approach and complement ongoing regional and international engagements. As part of the strategy, the UN special envoy should do the following:

- *Expand dialogue to include a broader range of Syrian stakeholders.* Syria's conflict has resulted in multiple social and political fissures. In order to preserve the territorial integrity of the country and achieve stabilisation, Syrian understandings on a political horizon and governance systems are urgently needed. A neutral third party will have to facilitate these understandings, moving beyond limited government and formal opposition circles to include civic, business and religious stakeholders. Armed actors who accept the principle of

a negotiated national solution to the Syrian crisis must also be part of the political dialogue. Once appropriate representatives have been identified, the special envoy should sponsor, but not lead, forums to enable groups to collectively analyse the conflict in all its relevant forms, respond to options for a resolution and articulate confidence-building measures. Alternatively, de Mistura can defer to external track III and II initiatives for this purpose. Either way, it is essential that these tracks are appropriately sequenced and complementary to official talks.

- *Collate a road map for peace.* Whether or not de Mistura leads a Syrian dialogue, his good offices should collate outcomes into an actionable plan. Comparative experts can help fill in substantive conceptual gaps, drawing on lessons learned from other conflicts. The road map can provide a national framework against which localised interventions can be calibrated and scaled.
- *Deepen regional and international diplomacy.* The special envoy is now on his third round of consultations with concerned states. These consultations are critical to reaching out to previously excluded actors like Iran. They are also opportunities to push the anti-IS coalition agenda beyond its current narrow counterterrorism focus to include Syrian peace needs. As Syrian interests become clearer to De Mistura, he in turn can use them to inform regional and international players and nudge them toward a constructive accommodation of the Syrian dimension of the conflict. Meanwhile, targeted diplomacy is needed to end the global networks feeding Syria's war economy.
- *Advocate for accountability on the part of all armed actors.* A peace process strategy will depend on adequate security space for a Syrian dialogue. The government and insurgent groups alike should be pressured to stop arrests, indiscriminate attacks and other human rights abuses undermining peaceful initiatives, including as explicit elements of local ceasefires. Consistent private and public leadership on this issue would also restore desperately needed values to diplomacy on Syria and help shore up localised mediations.
- *Empower Syrian women and other civil society actors.* Despite a severe operating environment, Syrian women and their broader civil society networks have been leading the campaign for inclusive, non-violent change. Not unlike other violent conflicts, they have been the first to accept that Syria has reached a stalemate necessitating mutual compromises. They are working to mobilise their grass-roots constituents to support a negotiated settlement. Mechanisms should be created to ensure that their initiatives inform all four circles of influence.

Linking the local and national

Reducing violence and improving humanitarian access across Syria is essential to a peace process support strategy. The special envoy should back local ceasefire efforts by moving between support for them *and* a national peace process strategy.

Numerous truces and ceasefires have been agreed across Syria at military flashpoints (Integrity: Research and Consulting, 2014). They have garnered a great deal of attention lately, with many analysts looking for short- to medium-term solutions to address the Syrian conflagration. One mediation group recommended that localised ceasefires should lead to a national plan for elections (Ignatius, 2014).

Whether or not local ceasefires constitute progress in parts of Syria is highly contested. Most Syrians and observers regard them as an extension of the government's war effort to reclaim territory and rehabilitate its international standing. Indeed, in ceasefire talks the government is typically represented by state security or paramilitary forces. Outcomes tend to mirror the power imbalances among the highly repressive state, disparate insurgents and subjugated communities, as well as continuing sectarian tensions.

A recent opinion poll undertaken by Omran Strategic Studies (2014) indicates that while widely supported among Syrians, localised ceasefires have not significantly improved perceptions of trust and in many cases have not resulted in tangible security or humanitarian improvements. At the same time, as the joint report by the Syrian organisation Madani and the London School of Economics demonstrates, Syrian citizens are initiating them (Turkmani et al., 2014).

While more studies are needed to understand what – if any – conflict transformation opportunities flow from such localised ceasefires, obvious measures that could improve their strategic value include:

1. a dedicated, responsive civilian counterpart representing the government side;
2. a third-party mechanism to monitor written agreements; and
3. commitments to protect civilians, including the free movement of non-violent relief and media actors following an agreement.

A UN-guaranteed ceasefire in Aleppo or other areas of the country could also give localised ceasefires more visibility and, in turn, more momentum to build in these guarantees. The possibility that a ceasefire would hold in Aleppo, however, appears increasingly dim, with mainstream rebel leaders calling for a nationalized process.

Conclusion

De Mistura's appointment is an opportunity to improve on past UN mediation efforts and lay the foundations for productive Syrian talks. As the anti-IS campaign proceeds, it will be vital to reach regional and international understandings, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and including Turkey, Russia and the U.S., on stabilising Syria and the wider region. Yet longer-term stabilisation and eventual peace will need to come from inside Syria. Localised ceasefires appear to be stopgap measures to address the immediate military crisis in parts of Syria. A peace process strategy that links them or other shorter-term stabilisation efforts to an overarching peace process strategy for the wider Syrian conflict would increase their relevance to the special envoy's mission and the chances of an eventual resolution.

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