

Scenarios for a peace mission for Syria¹

By **Álvaro Vasconcelos**

■ Executive summary

This policy brief reviews the current political and humanitarian situation in Syria and analyses possible scenarios for a peace mission for Syria. The brief argues that the most likely scenario for an end to the conflict would require a regionally led solution involving Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, with the eventual backing of the U.S. and Russia.

Four preliminary conclusions have been identified:

- There is a highly fragmented military situation and any peace deal will face armed opposition.
- There will probably be a need for a peace mission. One option might involve limited missions to secure local ceasefires. A second option could involve a two-tier mission that, following a peace deal, would be able to perform a mix of tasks including peace enforcement and peacekeeping.
- A coalition of EU states should assume the hard military core of any two-tier mission within a “Berlin Plus” framework that allows for the use of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) assets and capabilities. They should act, however, with the participation of a wider grouping of states, including BRICS countries such as Brazil, Russia and India, as well as members of the Arab League.
- There is no solution to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) challenge in isolation from the broader issues at the root of the conflict. A democratic political process with elections and a new constitution must be the end game for any peace mission.

After years of war, a peace mission to Syria may appear to be a utopian ideal. However, there is a need for critical analysis of the available options for building and sustaining peace in Syria, including the option of a peace mission. The United Nations (UN) developed contingency plans for a mission during the Geneva II Conference on Syria, and its envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has been trying to implement a plan to freeze the conflict in certain zones, notably in Aleppo (see Hilal, 2014). So far, this plan has failed.

However, opening a debate on how to design and implement international monitoring of a peace deal will help to

ensure that the international community will be prepared if circumstances allow such a mission to take place. It will also create an opportunity for a global dialogue among states that could eventually contribute to a “coalition of the willing” providing military assets, including troops on the ground, for such missions, in support of a political settlement in Syria.

A fragmented strategic situation

The Syrian conflict has evolved from a democratic uprising into a sectarian regional war involving Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as Russia and, to a limited extent,

¹ This policy brief is based on a report of the same title written by Álvaro Vasconcelos for the Arab Reform Initiative, with the support of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) (http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/11-14_Report_Scenarios-for-a-Peace-Mission-for-Syria.pdf), and builds on the debates following the presentation of the report in Geneva, Marrakesh and Ankara in late 2014.

Western powers. The Syrian war has reignited the conflict in Iraq. The declaration of an “Islamic caliphate” by ISIS, and the subsequent formation of an international coalition to fight the group, has resulted in the direct involvement of the U.S. and a number of other states in the Syrian war.

Any peacekeeping operation to take place in the Syria that will emerge from this war will face an immense challenge in terms of national reconciliation, truth, justice and protection of the peacekeepers.

The current armed conflict is likely to end with parts of the country under the control of forces that have not participated in a political settlement. Any mission is likely to face armed resistance from ISIS, other opposition groups, some of the militias close to the regime and groups with criminal objectives. The situation will be complicated by the presence of armed actors that may not accept central national or international control, such as foreign military forces, including Hizbullah and Iranian military units. In summary, the highly fragmented military situation makes it imperative that the cooperation of regional players is secured to reduce obstruction of any peacekeeping force.

Scenarios for an end to the conflict

It is possible to envisage three different routes to ending the conflict.

Internal resolution

This seems very unlikely. The Assad regime may be able to keep control of a large portion of the country but not all of it, with the end result that the country will be divided into mutually antagonistic regions, as neither side is able to defeat the other.

Externally driven international settlement

This is also unlikely, as there is no consensus for a humanitarian intervention based on the principle of responsibility to protect. There is also little likelihood of a diplomatic solution being brokered among major powers, even with a UN lead, not least because of the worsening of relations between the U.S. and Russia over Ukraine.

Regionally led solution

This seems to be the most likely option, but it would need compromise between regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Its success would also depend on eventual support from the U.S. and Russia and on the evolution of U.S.–Iran relations. The regional solution may, however, contribute to the break-up of Syria into zones of influence according to the interests and influences of neighbouring states. As a result, avoiding fragmentation should be a key guideline for any peace mission.

Possible formats for a mission

Developing a successful mission will require learning from past experiences, in particular from the United Nations

Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS). According to its chief, Lieutenant General Robert Mood, the deployment “was unarmed, had a weak mandate, followed passive rules of engagement, and operated within a political six-point plan that was challenging to translate to field realities without full commitment from all parties, including the UN Security Council” (Mood, 2014). Any new international mission will need a clear mandate and the benefit of international backing to be successful.

There are two non-exclusive possibilities regarding how a potential peace mission could come about.

A mission to support limited agreements

This minimalist scenario prioritises managing the conflict and the humanitarian crisis through local ceasefire agreements to facilitate humanitarian access. The plan for Aleppo proposed by de Mistura had a limited window of opportunity, but joint efforts to fight against ISIS in some regions may provide other opportunities. For such ceasefires to be credible and find support, monitoring by an international mission would have to play a role. Such a mission could also start to foster relations between opposition forces and sections of the Syrian Armed Forces.

A two-tier UN peacekeeping operation

The most likely scenario for any peace mission will be one that comes after a peace deal and with a UN Security Council Resolution under Chapter VII. The consensus among experts is that any peacekeeping operation will need to be preceded by a peace-enforcing operation. A single two-tier mission combining a robust stabilising force for peace enforcement and a peacekeeping force would be more effective than two separate operations. From day one, such a combined force would have to deal with an immense and long-term mix of tasks in addition to the obvious objectives of halting the armed conflict, stabilising the situation and protecting its own personnel. These tasks would include creating conditions for a new political process aimed at establishing a democratic and inclusive Syria, working towards the return of refugees and internally displaced people, applying the rule of law and protecting public order, and organising free elections.

The current trend is towards small, fast and regional peace-enforcement operations, such as those implemented in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali in 2013–2014. These operations can or cannot be implemented following a UN Security Council mandate. In general, they have a strong component of regional (African in these cases) forces. In the cases of the CAR and Mali, France played the leading role, with U.S. infrastructure and military support (without involving forces in conflict). It is difficult, however, to see how this model could be applied to the Syrian case (van der Lijn et al., 2014).

Building an effective multilateral mission: the “Berlin Plus” option

If a regional initiative succeeds the involvement of forces from regional countries to follow it through, that may increase the danger of a Dayton-type solution being imposed, as in Bosnia, which would freeze the current sectarian divisions. It would not be wise, therefore, for the regional powers to provide the peace-enforcing component of any mission.

Barring direct NATO involvement, the best possibility seems to be the European option. This would imply the formation of “a coalition of the willing” that could act in line with the “Berlin Plus” arrangements,² using NATO assets and capabilities, including headquarters facilities for operational planning, while being conducted under the EU umbrella. This option may be facilitated by the end of European engagement in Afghanistan. France, the UK, Italy and eventually Germany should form the core of such a force. Nordic countries such as Norway, Finland and Sweden may also be willing to participate in a supporting role, as they have done in Mali.

The “Berlin Plus” option would imply the deployment of significant numbers of European ground forces. This is, after all, the lesson to be taken from the Libyan experience, in which an air operation contributed to the fall of Qaddafi, but the lack of a peacebuilding strategy and commitment undermined the subsequent stabilisation of the country.

Any peacekeeping force will need to involve non-Western countries too. Brazil, Indonesia and India should be part of this conversation. It is likely that those countries will be more willing to participate in the peacekeeping dimension than in the stabilisation one. The eventual involvement of Russian peacekeepers in Syria could be perceived as a guarantee by Alawite supporters of the regime. Maghrib countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria are also potential contributors, with the backing of the Arab League.

Any peacekeeping operation will need the cooperation of the Syrian army, as well as that of opposition armed forces that have signed the peace agreement. Those working on paving the road to a peaceful Syria should keep in mind that the success of the whole endeavour hinges on the involvement of Syrians with the right profile.

Conclusions

An international, including any regional, attempt to deploy a military-style operation aimed at halting the armed violence, addressing the humanitarian crises and creating stable conditions for a political process will face significant and multifaceted challenges, including the risk of armed opposition. International and regional conditions will dictate the legal and political framework for such an operation. Building on the lessons learned from other

peace missions, it is, however, possible to discern some of the key requirements that need to be in place, including:

- Sufficient Syrian, regional and international political and diplomatic backing for an armed peacebuilding intervention. As a minimum, a certain degree of acceptance, in terms of commitments not to undermine or oppose such an operation, will be required from the key regional and international stakeholders.
- Both the Syrian and the international backing must be robust enough to sustain setbacks and challenges in the implementation phase.
- Any peacekeeping operation must be framed in the context of a broader political strategy, aimed at ending the fighting and creating conditions for a managed political transition.

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2 See European External Action Service. “About CSDP – The Berlin Plus Agreement.” <http://eeas.europa.eu/csdp/about-csdp/berlin/>

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