

Prospects for the Resumption of the Peace Process in Syria

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Received: February 1, 2023

Accepted: March 8, 2023

Online Published: March 15, 2023

doi:10.5539/ass.v19n2p66

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v19n2p66>

Abstract

The paper highlights the key features of the conflict in Syria and the reasons for the involvement of a number of regional and global players, whose behavior is driven by strife to protect their interests the best way possible, thus making it indicative of the prospects for resuming the peace process. The paper explores the current attitudes and approaches of the major stakeholders and ventures to analyze the rationale behind their actions in the event of an unfolding comprehensive peace process. Furthermore, the paper makes an assessment of the trends and prospects for a general reduction of hostilities and reopening the peace process vis-à-vis the attempts by Turkey and other important players to restore ties, improve relations and establish a dialogue with the Syrian regime. The paper goes on to reveal the nation-wide and local obstacles that need to be overcome should a genuine attempt be made towards rapprochement, ceasefire and reconciliation as a prelude to pacification and comprehensive discussions about future governance and a new Constitution. Finally, the paper concludes by suggesting a number of indicators worth following in order to anticipate a growing likelihood for reopening the peace process.

Keywords: conflict, peace process, rapprochement, Syria, Turkey

1. Introduction

Saying that the events determining the course of the internal conflict in Syria have always been influenced by the dynamic changes in the security environment regionally and globally would be an understatement, since the conflict has long acquired the significance of a sufficiently influential factor capable of triggering crucial events with a lasting imprint on the competitive geopolitical areas in the Middle East, Asia and beyond. Since its inception 12 years ago, the conflict deeply affected the interests and security of a number of state and non-state players, whose direct or indirect intervention turned it into a permanent source of tension, thus limiting the possibilities of a solution based on mutually acceptable compromise.

Stakeholders have been an integral part of the conflict's geostrategic balance for so long, that its implications gradually became a vitally important aspect of their foreign and security policy. Any change in the balance of power, agendas and priorities of the global and regional powers concerned is almost immediately reflected upon the events on the ground. In this way, the internal strife turned into a fierce and endless struggle for power and supremacy among irreconcilable opponents, propagated by the clash of opposing political agendas.

In their efforts to protect their interests as much as possible, every time the resumption of the peace process seems more likely, the main parties involved struggle to occupy favorable negotiating positions rather than to overcome the resistance of their opponents on the battlefield. They are fully aware that the peace process will bring about profound changes in the military-political situation, once conditions arise for an inclusive process aiming to construct a future government based on an acceptable power-sharing mechanism. Therefore, they shift priorities depending on the prospects for a ceasefire agreement and reopening negotiations and, according to the situation at hand they rely either on hostile approach or on peaceful initiatives.

The major allies and the main adversaries of Bashar al-Assad's regime would prefer to achieve their goals peacefully, but everyone is aware of the discouraging obstacles currently standing in the way, stemming from the opposing interests of the stakeholders on key issues related to the nature of the future governance and the role of the regime. It is noteworthy that the present Syrian government has good control over the two leading negotiation formats of the peace process: the Constitutional Committee talks, where it has an equal say beside anti-government forces represented by the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and civil society members; and the

Astana talks, where its staunch supporters (Russia and Iran) are guarantor countries beside Turkey.

The Syrian leadership looks at the peace process mainly as a way to preserve its power, to end the resistance of anti-government forces and establish full and lasting control over the entire territory of the country. The pacification of the country, the post-war reconstruction of its economy and infrastructure, the fight against jihadism and extremism, the return of refugees and displaced persons and the improvement of the humanitarian situation are regarded mostly as opportunities to maintain and strengthen the regime's legitimacy at home and abroad.

2. Approaches and Attitudes Towards the Peace Process

The regime's allies in the Astana peace process support peace initiatives as long as they correspond to their interests and do not threaten the power of the government in Damascus. Russia would not allow any peace agreements to jeopardize its military operations conducted from Khmeimim Air Force base and Tartus Naval base, as it uses Syria as a springboard to gain momentum on the way to increasing its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East and restoring its status of a world power. Russia's red lines in the peace process are meant to guarantee the secular nature of the governance and the leading role of the Syrian Alevi leadership and Bashar al-Assad himself. The Russian leaders fear that a future Sunni-dominated government will not treat their interests favorably, which would impede the implementation of Russian strategy in the region.

Iran wouldn't allow Bashar al-Assad's power to be a bargaining chip in the eventual reconciliation process either, but for reasons entirely different. The Iranian leadership, in addition to Syrian political support based on anti-Israel solidarity, enjoys direct access to Syrian territory in order to conduct its extensive logistics operations in favor of the Lebanese "Hezbollah". Because of that Iran seeks to keep the Alevi minority in power as a trustworthy ally in its existential rivalry against Israel and Saudi Arabia. If comprehensive negotiations eventually took place, Iran would try to cash out its enormous credit for the survival of the Syrian regime as compensation for the huge political, economic and social expenses paid so far.

Turkey regards the peace talks as useful and effective as long as they meet the goal to prevent further territorial-administrative separation of the Kurdish regions in Northern Syria and sever the interaction between the People's Defense Forces (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Southeast Anatolia. This goal has absolute priority even over removing the Assad regime from power and replacing it with a Sunni government, preferably dominated by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood - an outcome much desired and long awaited, but yet unattainable.

The United States do not have a specific strategy for the peace process and a clearly defined approach towards the country's pacification and stabilization. That is why the regime's removal from power is preceded by the utmost priority – the complete eradication of the Islamic State with the help of local Kurdish allies, YPG in particular. To that end, they maintain a respectful presence of about 900 combat and special operations troops in Northeastern Syria to support anti-terrorist operations of Kurdish forces, and in Al-Tanf military base in the South-Eastern province of Homs to monitor the situation along the Syrian-Iraqi border, including the movements of pro-Iranian armed groups along Baghdad-Damascus Highway (Boussel, 2023).

The Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Northern Syria and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) would disapprove any agreements undermining Kurdish self-governance and strife for autonomy as a prerequisite to political independence. Therefore, they watch with suspicion the rapprochement between Turkey and Syria, which began in December 2022 with Turkish President Erdogan's clear attempt to normalize relations with his Syrian counterpart. The Kurdish leaders are well aware that mutual understanding and cooperation between their main opponents will not bring anything good to the quest for further political and economic self-determination of the Kurdish areas in Northern Syria (Rojava). In order to avoid possible adversities they will probably try to strengthen ties and deepen cooperation with US forces even more, promoting the YPG once again as the main strike force against terrorism and extremism, although they realize that cooperation with American forces does not necessarily provide full American support for the Kurdish cause, because a united Syria is more in line with American interests. Nevertheless, in January 2023 the SDF, led by the YPG, together with US Special Forces conducted a large-scale anti-terrorist operation in Raqqa province and captured more than 60 terrorists and sleeper cell members (McNulty, 2023).

The easing of tensions and normalization of relations between Syria and Turkey will change the balance of power in Northwestern Syria, where the Syrian National Army (SNA) and other Turkish-backed militant groups opposing the radical Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) are fearful that a possible truce could diminish Turkish support, thus limiting their ability to control territories and threatening their existence as a significant part of the political landscape. HTS itself will most likely take advantage of the Syrian-Turkish rapprochement to advance further its

much desired transformation from a jihadist organization originating from the former Al-Nusra Front, into a nationally acceptable political entity entitled as much as any other to participation in internal politics. HTS will try to promote this image by labeling the other Turkish-backed militant factions as collaborators and claiming to be the sole irreconcilable opponent of the Syrian regime.

3. Trends and Prospects Assessment

In order to assess the likelihood of the resumption of the peace process, we must first analyze whether the main players are ready to contribute to a comprehensive de-escalation of tensions, cessation of hostilities and solution of the conflict through negotiations.

We need to look at Turkey's reasons as the initiator of the rapprochement and find out whether it is just a maneuver to protect opportunistic interests or a prelude to a meaningful dialogue that can lead to a comprehensive agreement on a ceasefire and start peace negotiations. We should bear in mind that Turkey's motives are complex and driven both by the imperatives of regional security and by domestic political considerations related to the need to bolster public support for President Erdoğan and his administration. The Syrian conflict has always had a strong impact on the internal political dynamics in Turkey due to the huge number of refugees on Turkish soil (3.6 million by government counts), but given the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in May 2023, in which President Erdoğan will seek re-election and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) will seek another victory, they are both inclined to pay more attention to criticism of their "open door" policy towards Syria and are more willing to follow recommendations to establish dialogue with the Syrian government.

To reaffirm their mutual commitments and strengthen ties with the Turkish leadership, the leaders of the moderate opposition – the Chairman of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the heads of the Syrian Interim Government and the Syrian Negotiations Commission visited Ankara in January 2023 to receive assurances from Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu that Turkish-Syrian rapprochement does not mean that Turkey will cease its support and abandon the opposition (Yazıcıoğlu, 2023).

The question arises, if we witness a genuine normalisation of relations, how is this going to affect the other countries concerned, for example the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, which have controversial relations with Turkey, but are no less interested in the unfolding events in Syria and the prospects for resolving the conflict. Convincing evidence of the Syrian regime's emergence from isolation is the fact that its former Gulf Cooperation Council opponents reversed their positions and are now putting great effort into mending fences with Assad. After Oman, Bahrain and the UAE re-established relations and sought to develop cooperation, the leader of the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, is taking action to restore dialogue. The expected Syrian-Saudi rapprochement is likely to be encouraged by Iran, which favors improving relations between Turkey and Syria and tries to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia. The US will certainly have serious objections to such an apparent rehabilitation of the Syrian regime, so the Saudis will have to find a way to follow a separate and independent policy in the interests of the GCC member states.

This policy will be put to a serious test given the repercussions of a key event that reveals the balance of power among the opponents and supporters of the Syrian regime: the recent decision of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS), a descendant of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), to re-establish relations with the Assad government and open an office in Damascus. This is certainly beneficial for Iran, as it will bring HAMAS closer to the anti-Israeli "axis of resistance", which, in addition to the Syrian regime, includes the Lebanese "Hezbollah" and the Palestinian "Islamic Jihad", another MB offshoot. The rapprochement was most likely facilitated and mediated by Iran and Hezbollah, whose conciliatory efforts obviously proved fruitful given the fact that HAMAS leadership, the former leader Haled Mashal in particular, soon after the onset of the Syrian conflict came out in support of the Syrian opposition and left Syria for Qatar (Fansa, 2022).

In their relationship with Syria, the Saudis need to take a flexible approach and overcome a number of obstacles like the regime's alliance with Iran, the disapproval of their strategic ally the United States and last but not least, Assad's rapprochement with HAMAS. Although HAMAS has officially renounced its affiliation to the MB, the Brotherhood remains an adversary of the Saudi royal family, and a close ally to Turkey and Qatar.

Due to the war in Ukraine, Russia limited its military presence and its capabilities to conduct large-scale military operations in Syria, which caused substantial changes in its behavior within the partnership with Turkey. Russian officials deepened their disapproval of Turkey's plans for another military operation in Northern Syria and began to urge more emphatically their Turkish counterparts to establish dialogue with the Syrian government. Such a dialogue can indeed give Turkey the opportunity to achieve some of its goals at the negotiating table, but above all it gives advantage to the Assad government helping it to overcome its isolation and weakening the arguments

of its international opponents. Domestically it strengthens the government's position as an unavoidable internal factor and sows turmoil among the opposition.

This line of conduct was successful because the war in Ukraine extended the autonomy of Turkey's actions in Northern Syria, but didn't embolden it enough to make unilateral decisions and take self-sufficient action without consulting and coordinating with Russia and the US (Erkmen, 2023).

At the same time, Moscow encourages the Syrian Kurds to negotiate with the regime implying that rapprochement with Assad will enhance their protection against forthcoming Turkish military operations in Northern Syria. Notably, Russia and the US are united in their disapproval of the Turkish military operations, but for completely different reasons. Russia sees the operations as an obstacle to Assad's ambitions to regain control over the country's entire territory, while the US does not want its close YPG allies to suffer casualties and lose combat capabilities.

Recent developments indicate that the main opposing parties are not backing down from their interests, but some of the regime's regional opponents are prepared to work towards reducing hostilities in order to establish a dialogue and demonstrate readiness to seek mutually acceptable compromises.

All parties concerned are aware that any meaningful talks should begin with a comprehensive ceasefire, especially in Idlib Governorate, and the first stage of the peace process must include a broad reconciliation. Then, talks about the new Constitution and the future governance of the country would be relevant.

Clearly, the key players presently envision a scenario in which hostilities are eased, tensions are reduced and conditions are suitable for a resumption of the political process. It is difficult to predict the starting point, but most of them seem to realize the conflict is entering a new phase, in which peaceful initiatives of dialogue and negotiation are a better tool to protect their interests than armed struggle. That's why the main parties involved are reshuffling partnerships, repositioning past strategies and reconsidering attitudes in order to hold a more advantageous line should there be a significant shift in the military-political environment towards a general scale-down of tensions.

Indeed, if a lasting truce is reached and the political process begins, the problem of postwar reconstruction will become very important. Then, the upper hand will shift from the militarily strong players to the solvent ones like the European Union and the GCC countries, who must find a way to work with the Syrian regime.

4. Conclusion

It is worthwhile to monitor the behavior of the main parties concerned and to watch for the appearance of the following indicators, which would signal a growing likelihood for re-opening the peace process:

- Continuing tendency of rapprochement and reconciliation between former bitter rivals and adversaries;
- Increasing influence of the humanitarian situation, rather than the military-political one, upon the willingness of the main actors to engage in dialogue and compromise;
- Renewing the regime's ties with Arab countries and improving Syria's chances to restore its membership in the Arab League. (There is no common agreement among members yet, due to a number of issues, including the military presence of Iran and Hezbollah on Syrian territory) (Ibrahim, 2022);
- Starting talks in various formats about different unresolved issues between Turkey and Syria - Turkish military operations in Northern Syria, the actions of the Turkish-backed militant groups, the return of refugees;
- Reaching an understanding to renew ceasefire agreements in Idlib Province and establish a tripartite monitoring mechanism by the guarantor countries.

Finally, the prospects for the resumption of the peace process depend mostly on the incentives of the parties involved to pursue non-violent approaches and peaceful means to mitigate and ultimately resolve the conflict in Syria.

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