Editorial

Bleak prospects for peace in Syria

By Steven Blockmans

The conflict in Syria has entered its fifth year with no resolution in sight. In the first four years of the war, the UN Security Council (UNSC) did not manage to adopt more than a handful of consequential resolutions, most notably on the removal of chemical weapons and access for humanitarian relief organisations. After a remarkable cessation of hostilities throughout March and April 2016, fighting has once again erupted, resulting in significant casualties and further destruction in blatant disregard of international humanitarian law. The fact that both the Syrian regime and opposition groups think that there is a military solution to the crisis augurs badly for the ongoing efforts to broker peace.

Paradoxically, it was the escalation caused by the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015 that refocused international attention on Syria and triggered renewed international peace efforts. Crucially, political meetings in Vienna in October and November 2015, co-sponsored by the United States and Russia, have led to the establishment of an inclusive ‘International Syria Support Group’ (ISSG), which provides a new format in which the United Nations, League of Arab States, European Union and leading governments’ Syria policy can be galvanised. For the first time, this platform also unites the states in the region that back one or the other side of the Syrian conflict.

As a result of these developments, the UNSC was able to adopt Resolution 2254 (December 2015) that defines the framework for a solution to the conflict in Syria, based on political transition. This resolution is now considered to be the main reference for outlining the UN-facilitated political process that should end the conflict through a “Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition” on the basis of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and the 2015 Vienna Statements. The resolution further clarifies that the political process is facilitated by the United Nations, through its Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. The ISSG is acknowledged as the central platform to facilitate UN efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Syria, thus depositing a shared responsibility for the political process both with the United Nations and the ISSG. In terms of substance, the resolution adopts the benchmarks for political transition as spelled out in the Vienna Statement of 15 November 2014, namely to establish within six months an “inclusive, credible, and non-sectarian governance” and to set up “a schedule and a process for drafting a new constitution.” The UN Special Envoy initiated the first round of the formal negotiations on 29 January 2016 and has since held three rounds of talks in Geneva.
The ISSG has proved to be a pivotal participant in the process. Whereas the EU participates in this 'contact group', it wields fairly little political power seeing that it has 'no dog in the fight'. US and Russian leadership has been essential in overcoming a political impasse in reaction to the military escalation in Syria that had led to the early suspension of the first round of the Geneva talks in February. As a result, an ISSG Ceasefire Task Force (co-chaired by the US and Russia) and an ISSG Humanitarian Task Force (chaired by the UN) were created. While the latter has been able to broker limited, yet important, improvements of humanitarian access, it is the former Task Force’s ability to impose the first-ever credible cessation of hostilities that is remarkable.

Prospects for sustainable peace in Syria are contingent on, first, the Geneva Talks leading to a political agreement on transition and, secondly, the transition process fulfilling the benchmarks of a new and democratic constitution, followed by free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections in line with international standards. But to get to all that, the US and Russia consider a new ceasefire as indispensable to a successful continuation of the peace negotiations. If possible, a new cessation of hostilities should be formalised into a ceasefire agreement, even before the conclusion of the Geneva Talks, to provide the basis for decisions on security governance required during the transition phase. The efficacy of the UN Security Council, which will need to endorse and support a political agreement, if it is reached in Geneva, depends completely on a US-Russian mutual understanding on Syria.

Meanwhile, the role of the EU in the negotiation process is mostly limited to supporting the US and Russia in finding a solution to the conflict. The EU can assist in preventing regional powers from undermining the Geneva talks. Thanks to its role in overseeing the implementation of the nuclear deal with Iran and its exploration of new fields of cooperation (e.g., trade, investment, combating narco-trafficking), the EU is uniquely placed to offer assurances to Tehran. In view of the deep scepticism on the Arab side of the Gulf, in particular from Saudi Arabia, about Iran’s actual intentions in the region, it is imperative that the emerging EU relationship with Iran is not seen to be at the expense of the Arab states. The EU should refute the prevailing zero-sum attitude and encourage broad regional cooperation, in particular in supporting conflict resolution in Syria.

As in previous situations where the EU was not a (political) player but a payer, the Union’s role in Syria will be primarily that of a post-conflict peacebuilder. The Union’s material support in implementing a future peace agreement will be essential in mustering the Marshall Plan-size aid to Syria and the Syrian people once transition starts. Here, the EU has lots of different elements to offer: lifting of sanctions, technical expertise, funding for reconstruction and cash-for-work programmes, reopening of diplomatic missions, recognition, and so on. Key to the reconciliation of fractured communities will be the EU’s support in assuring accountability for crimes committed during the war.

The Syrian population follows with keen interest all signals sent by international institutions and leading governments. Syrians may pressure their political representatives to be more flexible and agree to a solution that enjoys broad international support, and they will count on the European Union to play a substantial part in the Marshall-type aid that they and their country will need.

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