



Conference Report

Shockwaves of the

war in Syria

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This is a report of a closed session titled 'Shockwaves of the war in Syria', held as part of the TRT World Forum 2017. Being an off the record session, it allowed speakers and participants to freely use the information received. However, neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers, nor that of any other participant, was to be revealed. The views, themes and discussion points expressed in this conference report are those of participants and speakers present at the TRT World Forum 2017, and do not reflect the official view of TRT World Research Centre.

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Summary

The Syrian issue has come to be one of the hottest topics of the global agenda regarding the Middle East. This is further complicated with the involvement and intervention of both regional and major global powers. In the closed session of TRT World Forum titled 'Shockwaves of the War in Syria', Turkish, Syrian, Iranian, and international perspectives on the Syrian war were discussed with the attendance of experts from various backgrounds. The positions of Turkey, Iran and the Syrian opposition were presented by senior figures from these respective countries.

Discussions during the session mainly revolved around issues such as the future of the Syrian regime, influences of international actors, the Astana peace process, as well as the fate of armed groups in Syria. Participants referred back to the early stages of the uprising where the regime used a heavy-handed approach to crush peaceful protests spreading across Syria. During the civil war, the extremist factions being released from the regime prisons by Assad himself further complicated matters. According to Syrian expert, civilian populations had long suffered under the oppression of either the regime or of extremist groups like Tahrir al-Sham. Therefore, the opposition as well as the Syrian people welcomed Turkey's political stance against Assad. While recently the Turkish army helped liberate some areas from extremist factions - allowing local Syrians to enjoy the freedom of self-governance - experts say there is an urgent need to go back to the negotiation table.

With negotiations in Geneva making little progress, the Astana peace talks offer a more neutral platform for Iran and Turkey and provide new energy to the negotiations. According to an Iranian expert, Iran supports dialogue between Turkey and the Syrian regime, which is in line with the spirit of Astana, while Turkey seems to be sticking to the multilateral atmosphere of the process. The Turkish expert claims that Assad's lack of credibility on the ground has left the country to descend into a chaotic vacuum filled by foreign militias and terror groups, such as the YPG and DAESH, whose fates remain to be an important concern for Turkey. From the Turkish perspective, what needs to be discussed is the spheres of influence of the different actors in Syria to guarantee Syria's political reorganisation and territorial integrity.

Demilitarisation and the revival of civilian politics in Syria seem to necessitate the involvement of multiple local and international actors via processes like Astana peace talks. Whilst experts from different backgrounds do accept divisions and splits in the political landscape, multilateral processes and genuine negotiations seem to ease the transition to a more stable atmosphere in Syria. In this respect, political divisions will have to be tolerated for the sake of territorially intact borders. A transitional political process needs to be carried out by Syrians and this is possible only through multilateral diplomatic efforts that include demilitarisation and stabilisation of the Syrian landscape.

Introduction

The Syrian issue has come to be one of the hottest topics of the global agenda in the Middle East. What began as a peaceful uprising against the government in 2011 has now become a full-scale violent conflict, underpinned by a complex pattern of alliances and enmities. For some, the Syrian outbreak was seen as a struggle for democracy and for others, as terror. Whilst the Syrian opposition was recognised as the sole legitimate representation of the people, the emergence of groups such as DAESH and YPG has left the efforts of establishing a democracy off the agenda. This was further complicated by the involvement and intervention of both regional and major global powers.

As a result of conflict, challenges to international security have surfaced and multilateral diplomatic efforts - that include demilitarisation and stabilisation of the Syrian landscape - have been initiated. In the closed session of TRT World Forum titled 'Shockwaves of the War in Syria,' Turkish, Syrian, Iranian, and international perspectives on the Syrian War were discussed and the positions of Turkey, Iran and the Syrian opposition were presented by senior figures. Talks during the session mainly revolved around issues such as the future of the Syrian regime, influences of international actors, the Astana peace process as well as the fate of armed groups in Syria.

Turkey and the War in Syria

Since the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, Turkey has played an increasingly important role throughout the process. From its several attempts to persuade the Assad regime to introduce democratic reforms and not to escalate the tension, to the provision of shelter for displaced Syrian people, Turkey has taken an active part in trying to maintain relative stability in Syria. More recently, the Turkish Armed Forces began its peacekeeping mission in Idlib by pushing away the extremist factions. As a result, the opposition groups appreciate Turkey's position in Syria. Its active role in the resolution of regional conflicts has won it favourable notice in the Arab world, especially during the early stages of the uprising when the Assad regime used a heavy-handed approach to crush peaceful protests spreading across Syria. In the process, the extremist factions being released from the regime prisons by Assad, further complicated matters. According to one Syrian expert, civilian populations had long suffered under the oppression of either the regime or of extremist groups like Tahrir al-Sham, which controlled 70% of Idlib before Turkey's intervention.

The opposition as well as the Syrian people welcomed Turkey's political stance against extremist groups as well as the Assad regime. Whilst recently the Turkish military helped liberate some areas from extremist factions - allowing local Syrians to enjoy the freedom of self-governance - Turkey's cooperation with the Free Syrian Army opened up a space for civilian rule in the freed areas. In this regard, Idlib is an important spot where the opposition can present its own vision of governance.

Whilst this has been the case for the Syrian people, the regime, which stands side by side with Iran, has condemned Turkey's peacekeeping mission in Idlib.

Turkey's intervention in dealing with extremist groups in Idlib such as Tahrir al-Sham constitutes a legitimate action according to the deals reached in Astana. However, condemnation from the regime creates confusion for it previously declared its compliance with the decisions taken at the Astana meetings. According to an Iranian expert, this is mainly due to the lack of cooperation between Damascus and Ankara in peace talks. In this regard, Iran supports dialogue between the two capitals, as they fear that distrust and disconnection can lead to misinterpretation and clashing of stances - which is not in line with the spirit of Astana. Furthermore, the reason for Iran to hope for a stable bilateral relation between the two countries is due to the close link between Bashar al-Assad and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan prior to the start of the civil unrest - a relationship that was supposedly stronger than that of Assad and the Iranian President Hassan Rohani, contrary to current perceptions.

For the Turkish expert, the Astana process opens up a space for all key actors to talk to each other and yield concrete results, rather than ceding the negotiating space to the Syrian regime. Therefore, it is not realistic to expect a line of dialogue between Damascus and Ankara, as Assad has no credibility on the ground. The Turkish expert claims that this lack of credibility on the ground has left the country to descend into a chaotic vacuum filled by foreign militias and terror groups, such as the YPG and DAESH, whose fates remain to be an important concern for Turkey. From the Turkish perspective, what needs to be discussed is the various spheres of influence of the different actors in Syria to guarantee its political relocation and territorial integrity. Furthermore, Assad should also be considered as an actor on the ground even though he no longer has full control over all territories.

Unfulfilled Promises in Geneva and Search for a Common Ground in Astana

According to the Syrian opposition, the Geneva process has failed due to Assad's unfulfilled promises and the regime's harsh treatment of the opposition directly after the talks. The ultimate aim of the opposition is to remove Bashar al-Assad from peace talks in Geneva since he has lost his incentive to negotiate after the intervention of Russia and Iran. They state the urgency of a transitional process to post-Assad Syria that should be negotiated between the Syrian regime and the Syrian people. They hold a confident position in terms of their capacity of governance in a post-Assad Syria, as the opposition have already built a local governmental structure composed of almost 300 local councils selected by the people and an internal government in the areas freed of violent factions via the peacekeeping operations of the Turkish Armed Forces. Almost half of Syrian society, 48% to be precise, is being administered by this internal governmental system. Therefore, what needs to be done - once peacekeeping operations in Syria are completed - is to initiate a process similar to that of Geneva between the opposition and the regime.

However, with negotiations in Geneva making little progress, the Astana peace talks offer a more neutral platform for Iran, Turkey and Russia as well as provide new energy to the negotiations. According to the Turkish expert, whilst Geneva acts as a good umbrella with some practical and unpractical aspects, Astana has provided more of a concrete step forward.

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Coming to Terms with the Reality on the Ground

The Iranian expert states that despite the differences in opinions, the actors around the table in Astana are the ones that Iran chooses to trust and maintain good faith. On the other hand, actors like Saudi Arabia, the United States and Israel cannot be trusted. From the very beginning of the conflict, the United States and Saudi Arabia held a rejectionist stance and Israel had much to gain from the chaos that unfolded. From an Iranian perspective, the American stance in the Syrian issue is very similar to that in Iraq. Whilst America appeared to support Iraq's territorial integrity by recognising its central government, its policies reflected the opposite. In similar vein, despite the United States' repeated calls for a ceasefire and for a permanent, negotiated peace agreement, its government continues to supply arms to YPG militants in Northern Syria. And with Saudi Arabia allying itself with the United States, the Iranian government chooses not to trust or rely on either country.

The Iranian expert continues to state that the situation in Syria should not be seen from a binary of demand for democratic change versus terrorist resurgence. There were legitimate and peaceful protests during the beginning that were handled very harshly by the Syrian regime. However, even the United States acknowledges in its Intelligence Report, written in August 2012, that there were extremist factions in the country that were interested in violence. He states that the presence of Shiite militias in Syria can be better understood when they are taken as a response to extremist factions fighting in Syria. According to Iran, when these militias were brought in, there were already foreign fighters in the country. However, from an outsider's perspective it should be noted that for the local people, Shiite militias are as terrifying as DAESH. When the Iraqi army and Shiite militia, Hashd Al-Shaabi, took control in Kirkuk from KRG, people

were fleeing like people fled Mosul when DAESH took over the city, fearing mass atrocities. Considering the reality of Shiite militants on the ground, what Iran is seeking becomes unclear in the case of Iraq and Syria: whether spheres dominated by Iran or unified countries? On the one hand Iran is speaking of their unity and sovereignty. On the other hand, it is paving the way for further hegemony over these countries via militant groups such as Hashd al-Shaabi. The Iranian expert admits that there is a lack of trust between Iraqi citizens and the state and this is a major problem for the future of the country. According to him, it should also be noted that Iran stood with Irbil and helped defend the city when attacked by DAESH. When Massoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), appealed for help from the United States, his plea was largely ignored, thus allowing the return of the Iraqi military to where they were stationed before DAESH. The Iranian expert rejects the idea that Hashd Al-Shaabi is simply a sectarian force. Basing his arguments on his personal experiences in Iraq, he states that Hashd Al-Shaabi provides security and stability for the locals in and around Mosul. He mentions that there is normality in the major cities of the country such as Aleppo and Damascus. However, the Syrian expert rejects this point by stating that Syria is a country where at least 60% of the population has been internally or externally displaced. He continues to add that the binary of people who support Assad versus those who reject him is a false one. There are numerous different political positions of Syrian society and these positions should not be underestimated. From this perspective, the presence of foreign fighters in Syria has divided society more than ever, splitting the people into various regimes and opposition-affiliated camps. As a result of foreign intervention, it is not possible to establish communication between the Syrian society and the Syrian regime.

Conclusion: Towards a Realistic Consensus on the Future

Demilitarisation and the revival of civilian politics in Syria seem to necessitate the involvement of multiple local and international actors via processes like Astana. Despite divisions in the political landscape, the territorial integrity of Syria stands as one of the top issues. Whilst experts from different backgrounds do accept these divisions, multilateral processes and genuine negotiations handled in a realistic way seem to ease the transition to a more stable atmosphere in Syria. In this respect, political divisions will have to be tolerated for the sake of territorially intact borders. Therefore, setting the spheres of influence of outsider actors is an important step for maintaining territorial integrity while preserving political differences. By increasing the coordination between the powerful actors on the ground, Astana is a realistic step towards de-escalation and the integrity of Syria. According to the Turkish expert, Assad will no longer be a key actor since the fighting force on the ground is not the army of Assad but that of foreign militias. Without considering this reality, it would not be possible to take a step forward. In the current landscape, there is a need to consider the multiplicity of actors on the ground and in this regard, setting up spheres of influence is a more reliable and realistic way to move forward.

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