K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Stabilisation in Syria

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Question

Provide a brief overview of the current situation with regard to stabilisation in Syria.

Contents

1. Overview

The Syrian conflict is now in its seventh year and involves a wide range of both national and international parties. Crucially, no party is in a position to establish control over the entire country. This has implications for efforts at stabilisation.[1] There is increasing recognition that the Assad regime cannot be displaced and hence must factor in efforts to find a political solution. The recent focus has been on ways to reduce the fighting, paving the way for transition talks.

Two major processes have been underway to find a solution to the Syrian conflict: the 'Geneva process' under the auspices of the UN, and the 'Astana process' led by Russia, Iran and Turkey. The latter differs from the former in that it involves armed groups and seeks to find a way to end the fighting before then working on a political settlement. Progress was made at the latest round of Astana talks in May, with endorsement of four ceasefire zones in the country which would allow the return of displaced civilians and provision of humanitarian aid to those areas.

However, efforts to reach a political settlement face a number of key challenges: What to do about the Assad regime? Which of the opposition groups to include in transition talks? Can the territorial integrity of Syria be preserved? How to reconcile diverse and sometimes contradictory objectives (notably desire for peace vs. need to hold those responsible for human rights violations to account)? Even if a way can be found to end the fighting, post-conflict stabilisation challenges will include: resettlement of displaced civilians (many will not be able to return to the areas they came from); dealing with the massive and ongoing humanitarian crisis, and reconstruction; and the question of accountability for human rights violations.

Suggested stabilisation options include the formation of a Syrian National Stabilisation Force (SNSF) comprising Syrians to enforce law and order on the ground and allow a negotiation process to take place to reach a political settlement. The EU has been urged to no longer make economic assistance to Syria conditional on regime change, but direct support to non-regime areas and critical sectors and tie recovery assistance to a sustained ceasefire. Others have identified security sector reform as the priority, stressing the need for withdrawal of foreign fighters, followed by a constitutional framework for the transition process, decentralisation, reconstruction and return of refugees, and a comprehensive transitional justice programme – all underlaid by an end to fighting.

Lessons from other conflicts, notably Afghanistan and Iraq, include: a) the need to focus on establishing strong, central government rather than focusing first on democracy and markets - although this risks creating an authoritarian government; b) stabilisation can begin even while peace negotiations are underway; c) realistic goals should be set keeping capacities in view; d) it is important to focus on localism and initiate bottom-up discussions on Syria's future; e) stabilisation should be given priority over counter-terrorism; f) stabilisation requires integrated civilian leadership across developmental, security and diplomatic functions.

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[1] The US Institute for Peace defines stabilisation as 'ending or preventing the recurrence of violent conflict and creating the conditions for normal economic activity and nonviolent politics' (Freear, 2016: 1). It lists five 'end states' towards which all stabilisation activities should be directed: safe and secure environment; rule of law; stable governance; sustainable economy; and social well-being (ibid). The UK government defines stabilisation as 'one of the approaches used in situations of violent conflict which is designed to protect and promote legitimate political authority, using a combination of integrated civilian and military actions to reduce violence, re-establish security and prepare for longer-term recovery by building an enabling environment for structural stability' (UK, 2014: 1).

2. Conflict dynamics

- The Syrian conflict is not being fought between two parties, but rather is a multi-faceted one involving numerous actors. As well as the 'primary' conflict between the Assad regime and Syrian opposition groups, there are hostilities between different Syrian opposition groups (notably 'moderates' and extremists'); with the Kurds; with Islamic State; between extremist groups (ISIL[2] and Jubhat al-Nusrah); and a proxy conflict between Russia, Iran and Hezbollah supporting the Assad regime, and the West backing 'moderate' opposition groups. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Turkey are also involved, supporting diverse Syrian opposition including extremist groups – the former two countries largely backing groups in the south, and the latter countries those in the north.[3] Turkey is strongly opposed to the Kurds who control the Rojova territory.

- Control of Syrian territory is currently divided among the Assad regime, moderate and extremist Syrian opposition groups, ISIL and the Kurds.

- The Syrian opposition is highly fragmented and disorganised, with no coordinated national strategy to tackle the regime. While the main split is between 'moderate' and more extremist groups, there is also strong rivalry between the two main extremist groups: ISIL and Jubhat al-Nusrah. Overall, the role of 'jihadist' elements in the opposition movement has increased.

- While the Assad regime has made significant advances in recent months, thanks to Russian military assistance (notably air-force), it is not poised to establish control over the entire country. Similarly, opposition groups do not appear to be in a position to topple the regime (particularly with limited western military support) (Kodmani, 2015). There is thus a stalemate – neither side can defeat the other.

- The conflict in Syria is increasingly becoming a sectarian one (Jenkins, 2013). Many Sunni forces under the regime defected to rebel groups. The regime is bolstered by military units of local and foreign Shi'a fighters (Kodmani, 2015). The latter in particular are motivated by the desire to preserve Shi'a holy sites in Syria rather than loyalty or commitment to Assad.

- Iran is strongly committed to preserving the regime; it fears Assad's ouster could lead to similar efforts in Iran to bring down the Islamic Republic (Jenkins, 2013; Kodmani, 2015). Iran would also lose an important ally in the region. Iran has pushed Hezobollah to help the Syrian government, as well as helped mobilise Shi'a volunteers in Iraq and Lebanon.

- The West is reluctant to provide substantial military support to opposition groups for fear of Assad being replaced with an extremist Islamist government and out of fear that advanced weapons could get into the hands of extremist groups and be used to target the West (Jenkins, 2013; Kodmani, 2015).

- The war has led to an erosion of national institutions, including the country's armed forces, to be replaced by a patchwork of increasingly autonomous local entities. The government does not even have direct control of some of the militias fighting to preserve the regime (Jenkins, 2013). This has implications for any future settlement, as even if the armed forces are neutralised, there are hundreds of autonomous military formations and criminal groups.

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[2] Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)/ Islamic State(IS)/Da'esh

[3] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-qatar-syria-idUSKBN19517O

3. Attempts to reach a political solution

Alongside the official UN-led process aimed at finding a political solution, 'various combinations of "honest brokers" have attempted to land the final deal: Iran and Russia, Russia and the US, and most recently Russia, Iran and Turkey. The main challenge is to design a political transition process acceptable to all sides of the conflict (EPRS, 2017: 2).

UN and other initiatives

- UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan put forward a Six-Point Proposal in March 2012, but both he and his successor Lakhdar Brahimi, resigned in the absence of genuine talks;
- 2012 Geneva Communique called for the establishment of a transitional governing body, review of the constitutional order, and free elections, but progress on implementation has been very slow;
- 2014 Geneva II Conference, aimed at giving new impetus to implementation of the Geneva Communique, broke down after just one month;
- UN (current) Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura presented a new plan, endorsed by the UN Security Council (UNSC) in July 2015, to establish intra-Syrian working groups to address key aspects of the Geneva Communique (e.g. safety and protection of civilians, and political and constitutional issues pertaining to the formation of a transitional government), with the aim of producing a 'Syrian-owned framework document' on implementation of the Communique (EPRS, 2017);
- In October 2015, intensification of military operations in Syria and a worsening humanitarian crisis, provided impetus to reinvigorate the diplomatic process. The US, Russia, a group of 17 countries, plus the European Union, the UN and the Arab League, formed the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). In November 2015 the ISSG issued a joint statement expressing their commitment to ensuring 'a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the Geneva Communique in its entirety'. Significantly the ISSG included Iran, previously not invited to negotiations on Syria (EPRS, 2017).
- On 18 December 2015 the UNSC adopted Resolution 2254 which still refers to a transitional governing body, but more immediately calls for 'credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance', the drafting of a new constitution and UN-supervised elections (Lund, 2017). 'By shifting focus to incidental political arrangements, the UN is subtly de-emphasising the irreconcilable disputes over how to interpret transitional language inherited from 2012, thereby unlocking the prospect of a peace process that ultimately allows al-Assad to stay in power (Lund, 2017);
- Russia and Turkey brokered a ceasefire in December 2016, including a monitoring mechanism for violations. This led to adoption of UNSC Resolution 2336 on 31 December 2016, which paved the way for the Astana process (see below) and resumption of intra-Syrian talks under UN auspices in February 2017 (EPRS, 2017).

Astana process

- The Astana process is being led by Russia, Iran and Turkey. It was initiated in January 2017, with further rounds in February, March and May. Unlike in Geneva, where the goal has been to reach a political rather than military solution, the aim in Astana is to bring

armed groups together in order to reach a military agreement that results in a political accord (Balanche, 2017).

- Participants include the three sponsors, the Syrian government and some of the armed opposition groups in Syria, but not ISIL and not the Kurds (excluded at Turkey's insistence) (Balanche, 2017); the US has been present in an observer capacity.

- The latest (3-4 May 2017) round of talks in Astana led to endorsement of a Russian proposal to set up four de-escalation zones in the northern part of Homs, Idlib, East Ghouta and southern Syria, with the borders of these areas encircled by safety zones hosting centres to monitor the cease-fire (Balanche, 2017). The ceasefire zones will allow delivery of humanitarian aid and return of displaced civilians (Klein, 2017). Military operations elsewhere in the country, including against ISIL, will continue.

- The Russian proposal appears to have the support of all major international players as well as the Syrian government (Klein, 2017).

- While the Astana process is depicted by the sponsors as supporting the UN-led process, there are concerns that it could be a parallel initiative and undermine the latter (EPRS, 2017); the US has also expressed concern about Iranian involvement as a guarantor of the proposed cease-fire zones (Klein, 2017).

Other stabilisation options

- The dominant position among European states to date has been that no economic support will be channelled to Assad until the regime commits to a meaningful transition process. Barnes-Dacey (2017) argues that this 'insistence on linking economic assistance to a political transition ignores the reality on the ground, where the regime is more dominant than ever, and its longstanding unwillingness to negotiate its own demise'. Worse, he says this approach will contribute to the deepening impoverishment of the Syrian people. He calls instead from a national stabilisation approach that focuses on both stepped-up assistance to non-regime areas and a less restrictive approach to Damascus: recovery support should be tied to implementation of a sustained ceasefire in areas not part of anti-ISIS operations, and full humanitarian access. Increased assistance should focus on critical sectors, e.g. healthcare, education, core infrastructure, and should mostly be driven by engagement with local actors and the UN rather than government institutions in Damascus.

- Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF) – Hof et al (2015: 9) recommend recruiting, training, equipping and deploying a Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF) consisting exclusively of Syrians but funded and otherwise supported by the US/other countries. Its military mission would be to defeat those obstructing stabilisation and the establishment of legitimate, inclusive governance in all of Syria. The rationale for the SNSF is that there will not be 'a political-diplomatic solution opening a pathway to legitimate governance without military facts that make diplomacy feasible and productive' (Hof et al, 2015: 8).To ensure legitimacy, Hof et al strongly recommend that a temporary Syrian advisory task force be set up to guide the SNSF's formation. In the longer-term the proposed SNSF would ensure security during the negotiation process to reach a political solution and 'avoid another Libya' (Kodmani, 2015: 4).

- Kodmani (2015) identifies reform of the security sector as the priority in efforts to reach a settlement, and argues that this must include withdrawal of foreign fighters (pressured to do so by their various international backers, e.g. Turkey, Iran). This can then be followed by (ibid: 7):

a) development of a constitutional framework for the transitional process (including possibly using the existing constitution as a way of reassuring the governing authorities that some continuity is respected, while serious changes are introduced in a permanent constitution drafted by a constituent assembly);
b) decentralisation to ensure a system of governance that recognises the diversity of Syrian society;
c) reconstruction and the return of refugees, based on a sound distribution of responsibilities and funds among central and local governments, community-based structures and other civil society organisations;
d) a comprehensive transitional justice programme, most of which should be scheduled for implementation at a later stage;
e) stopping the fighting – experience shows that 'parties tend to ignore or easily violate a ceasefire as long as they do not see that a political solution is a serious possibility'.

4. Key challenges

Reaching a political solution

▪ *What to do about Assad?* – There are huge divisions over the Assad regime with some (Syrian opposition, USA, EU and most Arab states) wanting him gone, but others (e.g. Iran, Russia) seeing regime survival as crucial. So far it has proved very difficult to find an acceptable middle ground concerning Assad's future. There does appear to be increasing acceptance – driven by pragmatism - at least among international stakeholders, of the continued presence of the Assad regime. However, as Kodmani notes 'there is a difference between maintaining Assad and his regime unchanged, on the one hand, and keeping Assad in power for a given period of time until his departure can be scheduled as part of a planned democratic process based on constitutional mechanisms, on the other' (2015: 5).

▪ *Who can participate in political transition process?* – Opposition groups insist that Assad and his aides quit power at the start of the transition process. The regime opposes any attempts to bring 'terrorists' to the table: there is lack of clarity over which opposition groups are 'legitimate' and which are 'terrorists' (and hence can be targeted in combat operations). Opposition groups are also disunited, and represented by a number of different coalitions, e.g. the Riyadh-based High Negotiations Committee (HNC), the Moscow Group, the Cairo Group (EPRS, 2017: 5).

▪ *Can Syria's territorial integrity be preserved?* – Given that Assad cannot establish his authority over the entire country, and given the very divergent positions of anti- and pro-government forces on a range of issues, it is unclear whether Syria can be preserved in its current form. 'Future attempts at post-conflict stabilisation in Syria may founder, then, on the simple basis that "Syria" no longer constitutes a political entity that can be resuscitated in any meaningful shape' (Tuck, 2016). BUT the collapse or break-up of Syria poses a huge threat to the overall stability of the Middle East. Hence the solution could entail keeping Syria in its current form but with extensive political and economic decentralisation, including a special status for Kurdish areas (though this latter point could face opposition from Turkey).

▪ *How to reconcile contradictory objectives?* - Different parties have different objectives, and even objectives of individual stakeholders can be contradictory. For example, how to

reconcile the need for peace (which could necessitate cooperation with groups complicit in human rights violations) and the need for justice and reconciliation? (Tuck, 2016).

Post-conflict stabilisation

- The attacks and human rights violations that have been meted out by both sides mean it will be very difficult for displaced people to return to their homes (Jenkins, 2013). More likely is the solidification of ethnic and sectarian enclaves/areas across the country.

- Syria faces a serious humanitarian crisis which is worsening; development has been set back by decades. Even if conflict ends tomorrow, humanitarian needs will remain critical for months, if not years, to come (EPRS, 2017).

- Accountability – human rights and international humanitarian law violations have been carried out by all parties to the Syrian conflict, in particular the Assad regime and ISIL. It will be important to ascertain precisely the nature and scale of violations, identify those responsible and bring them to justice (Kodmani, 2015). But this will be a difficult task.

5. Lessons from other conflicts

- Based on experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, prioritise institutionalisation over liberalisation – instead of focusing first on democracy and markets, the focus should be on establishing strong, central government. Processes of political and economic liberalisation can exacerbate social tensions and undermine stability in the short and medium terms (Tuck, 2016). However, giving priority to strengthening host government institutions (judiciary, police, legislative and executive frameworks) in a future Syria 'risks creating an authoritarian government that would have no interest in introducing political pluralism and which might simply replicate the problems that have led to the collapse of the Syrian state in the first place' (ibid).

- Freear (2016: 1) identifies a number of other lessons for stabilisation and reconstruction in Syria from past conflicts including in Iraq and Afghanistan:
  a) The stabilisation process can start now and it not contradictory to negotiating peace between warring parties;
  b) It is important to focus on 'localism' and start bottom-up discussions now around a positive political vision for the future society, economy and politics of Syria;
  c) Additional major lessons include: unifying analysis, efforts and objectives across actors; being realistic about capacities available; maintaining strategic patience and managing expectations; and identifying actors with the necessary capacities, political resolve and influence;
  d) In recent and ongoing conflicts, counter-terrorism policies and stabilisation strategies have made uneasy bedfellows: renewed prioritisation should be given to stabilisation;
  e) Stabilisation is a political task and requires integrated civilian leadership across developmental, security and diplomatic functions. There should be a broader approach to engaging a range of actors and capacities, including the regional and private sector.

6. Feasibility of applying UK stabilisation doctrine

Four key characteristics of the UK's approach to stabilisation, laid out in a 2014 document by the UK Stabilisation Unit UK, 2014), are listed below along with constraints to their application in Syria:

- Any stabilisation action must be planned and implemented with an overtly political objective in mind, ideally with a means of identifying success and a process of transition to longer-term recovery – the Syrian conflict is still far from being in a transition stage;

- Stabilisation is an integrated, civilian-led approach which unifies efforts across Her Majesty's Government (HMG) – it is difficult to identify and engage appropriate civilian actors in Syria at this stage;

- Stabilisation is both flexible and targeted: it is important to plan and implement local-level stabilisation in the context of the wider political settlement – while local level engagement in some non-regime areas could be feasible, in many parts of the country this will be impossible; moreover, Syria is far from reaching a wider political settlement;

- Stabilisation will be transitory but cannot afford to be short-term in outlook or objectives – the dilemma in implementing this in Syria reflects the dilemma in reaching a political settlement to the conflict itself: in the short-term it will be necessary to accept and deal with Assad, but as yet there is no mechanism for longer-term removal of the regime, and it has made clear its determination to stay in power.

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