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Continuity and Transformation in the Syrian Conflict

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A. Introduction

The conflict has resulted in a dramatic transformation at all levels of State and society. After several years of conflict involving Syrian and non-Syrian actors, the Syrian Arab Republic has exhibited many of the symptoms of State failure, including loss of monopoly over the use of violence, compromised territorial control and, in many areas, a complete breakdown of order.

Intervention by rival external States turned the conflict into a proxy war, the regular economy giving way to a war economy and whatever layers of civil society that did exist transformed to a conflict society. Losses in human development in education and health have been disastrous and, seemingly, irreversible, which has been particularly painful for the generation of Syrians who came of age at the time of the uprising.

The toll of death and injury will haunt Syrians for years to come, especially if such deep societal impacts remain unaddressed, along with the massive internal and external displacement, which imply major demographic changes in the country.

Though the Government has regained control over large parts of the country, the conflict will leave a lasting legacy. The capacity of State institutions to deliver services has deteriorated. The involvement of multiple external and powerful actors is a further complication and makes a comprehensive solution difficult. Their ability to extend the conflict or block a political solution indicate a collective action dilemma for the conflict's resolution. For most Syrians still committed to political boundaries, there is a fear this will entrench a de facto partition of the country into several territories.

Despite these changes, there are elements of continuity. The Government remains in power and has significantly restored its status, and presently rules over most of the population. All the main Syrian actors have reaffirmed their commitment to a political solution and to the country's political boundaries. There is belief in a viable and unified Syrian State, despite disagreement on issues of political power, democratic representation and the degree of State centralization. Syrians of all political persuasions are exhausted and ready to move forward.

B. Territorial divisions: fragmentation, segmentation and reconsolidation

All the Syrian Arab Republic's territory and the vast majority of its people have been affected by the conflict, though the conflict has not proceeded in a linear fashion. With the distribution of territorial control, however, divisions within the country have followed a sequence of fragmentation, segmentation and reconsolidation. The proliferation of early violence, from late 2011 to 2013, implied a general fragmentation of control, whereby all sides had a presence throughout the country. In 2013, and particularly with the rise of ISIL, this gave way to more segmented control, the various sides were in charge in more distinct areas, with instances of conflict and cooperation between them but little or no presence in each other's territory. Aided by the Russian Federation intervention in 2015, the Government has gradually reconsolidated most, though not all, territory.

Starting in 2012, many areas fell outside government control and witnessed a proliferation of non-State armed groups. Initially, this coincided with territorial fragmentation due to the rapid escalation of conflict and the rise of groups fighting the Government in the north, east and south of the country, as well as around the main cities. The Syrian Arab Republic was opened to penetration

as never before. Though the borders were still recognized by the international community, they were routinely violated by external powers.

The original protest demands and root causes of the conflict were quickly lost, the conflict's intensity and widespread nature evident in the increasing number of deaths and injuries, which rose to hundreds of thousands, and in the millions of refugees and internally displaced people that eventually amounted to at least half of the pre-conflict population.¹ What complicated the conflict, and exacerbated territorial fragmentation, was not just the external backing of various groups with weapons and funds, and the arrival of foreign fighters, but also the increasing rivalry between these external backers. As a result, armed groups opposed to the Government were in conflict with the Government as well as each other.² Further, there was and remains a parallel rivalry between countries involved in the conflict.

From mid- to late 2013 through to 2015, the Syrian Arab Republic's territory was slowly segmented into distinct areas of control as smaller groups were defeated or consolidated by bigger ones. The most dramatic change

was the rise of ISIL, which in June 2014 defeated a large number of anti-government forces and seized a notable amount of the east and north-east provinces.

In some cases, boundaries were stable for several years; in others, they were in flux on a daily basis. For at least a time during 2015, however, there was a stalemate, and more defined spheres of influence. Each of the areas had their own governance projects with administrative structures and security, judicial and even educational systems that often mirrored the ideology of the dominant political formations. The relationship between them was complex, alternating between conflict and collaboration. Cooperation was in some instances strategic, in others tactical and pragmatic. The Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA) gained its de facto autonomy in 2012 following negotiations in the aftermath of the withdrawal of government forces. At the time, mounting opposition obliged government forces to adopt a contraction strategy.³ Yet, administrative ties were maintained; for example, government agencies maintained operation of the civil records that register births, deaths, marriage and divorce in areas controlled by the main Syrian Kurdish faction, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), particularly Afrin and Hasaka, even when they discontinued them in other areas outside government control, and often with the same employees and official supervision.⁴ More pragmatic concerns characterized cooperation in other areas. All areas engaged in trade or bartering in agricultural products, electricity supply and crude oil, and illicit goods. This exchange, along with smuggling, kidnapping, theft, extortion and other activities, gave rise to a war economy that entrenched the power of middlemen and warlords, and allowed non-State armed groups to finance themselves for long periods. As economic opportunities dwindled, more of the population became involved directly or indirectly in the war economy.

Since 2015, particularly with the advance of ISIL and the ensuing military intervention by the United States and Russian Federation, the territorial areas of control have shifted appreciably. The group's rapid rise alarmed the international community due to its extreme brutality and the threat it posed to the territorial boundaries of the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq, as well as to international security. The major powers established a presence, and took part in military action in the Syrian Arab Republic, including areas under ISIL control. Since 2018, the group has collapsed and, while it has not vanished, it no longer controls territory. The government, with the support of its allies, has regained most of the territory, including the city of Aleppo and areas controlled by ISIL, as well as much of the south that was previously held by the opposition. In 2020, control over segments of territory was reduced from four areas in 2015 to three main areas. The Syrian Government controlled most of the country, from the Jordanian border to the central and northern areas and east to the Euphrates river, alongside Russian and Iranian troops. The Democratic Autonomous Administration held areas, dominated by the PYD and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with western coalition forces led by the United States, held territory east and north-east of the

Euphrates. The Idlib Governorate and Afrin in the Aleppo Governorate remained outside government control. Along with a few other areas, as of 2019 they were directly controlled by Turkey, Turkish-backed Syrian troops and, in the case of Idlib, several armed groups, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (previously Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), or Al-Qaida in the Syrian Arab Republic).⁵

To assert that the Syrian Government has regained control over the majority of the Syrian Arab Republic, however, should not be misunderstood as denoting the type of control it enjoyed prior to 2011. Indeed, in significant parts of areas reclaimed from opposition control, government authority is often nominal, and/or requires a heavy military presence. Nor can services once enjoyed by the people of these areas be compared in any meaningful sense with the precarious conditions they continue to live under.

It can be argued that in the Syrian Arab Republic there was a case of partial State failure. While State failure is the conventional category for understanding the situation, between complete Weberian Statehood and total State collapse, there is a continuum with many hybrid or mixed scenarios. There is evidence of continuity and resilience. There is a continued belief among all but a few Syrians that the country's historical boundaries are inviolable, which suggests a robustness and durability of the "State", independent of any specific government or regime. Over recent years, the government attempted to keep State agencies running, even continuing to pay civil servants in areas outside Government control. The capacity of public institutions was seriously degraded but they continued to operate. Even in locations where the central Government lost control of territory, alternative forms of governance emerged. And in key respects, local administrative boundaries, and by-laws and practices, demonstrate continuities with those of the pre-conflict State, such as aspects of laws in the DAA. In many cases these continuities were deliberate decisions by local councils to maintain future State cohesion.



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C. Governance and rule of law during conflict

1. Fragmented governance

The consequences of the conflict on governance in the Syrian Arab Republic were dramatic. As territory was segmented under different areas of control, those holding power established their own governance structures. Syrian refugees were also living under different structures, laws and practices, depending on the host country or even location within a country. For the competing governing powers, legitimacy rested as much on ideology and political vision as their competence in governance and delivering services. The most successful were in areas able to maintain a certain rule of law, security and basic service delivery, and there were limited though important examples of democratic self-governance. The Government attempted to maintain normal functioning of its institutions, including administrative work and service delivery, to all areas under its control, but was hampered when severe shortages arose as a result of the conflict, such as a decline in power generation capacity and water availability.

Governance in areas controlled by the State continued to exhibit many of the features of the pre-conflict model, despite early attempts at reform. The revoking of the Baath Party's leading status in the revised 2012 Constitution provided an opportunity for transition to multiparty rule. While in principle this cleared the way for competition, and several new parties were licensed, no such system was compatible with the conflict period. The Government's policy towards power-sharing was minimalist. While the opposition and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué⁷ prescribed power-sharing, the government model was one of national unity that would include acceptable opposition forces that acknowledged the legitimacy of the ruling body, under the continued presidency of Bashar al-Assad. The centralization of power, impunity of security services and stifling of political life and civil liberties continued largely as before.

When the State's administrative reach contracted from areas lost to opposition groups, the resulting ungoverned space was filled by informal, hybrid governance, including the opposition-founded Syrian Interim Government's attempts in the north, and the DAA. Service provision was initially filled by councils born of the local coordination committees that had organized anti-government protests, and by civil society movements. Opposition activists saw this civil system as constituting an institutional alternative to government rule. It was highly localized, however, and reliant on intermittently functioning networks, resulting in increasing fragmentation. This was exacerbated by regional-level backing for rival groups and the third layer of governance by international donors, who channelled funds, along with their own conflicting agendas, through rival external opposition groups or

private subcontractors.⁸ At the same time, an integral part of the war economy was intentional destruction of independent governance attempts through shelling and aerial bombardment by government forces. In addition, massive fires across wheat, barley and cotton fields in the late spring and summer of 2019 in north-eastern of the Syrian Arab Republic and northern Iraq devastated farmers' livelihoods and further drove up food prices.

In many places, the governance vacuum was filled by Islamist movements and organizations, driven by a combination of sectarianism, jihadist ideology and competition for control of resources. While ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra were the most radical and effective, differences in doctrine and practices between them and the likes of Ahrar al-Sham were, generally, only a matter of degree. Their recruitment pool was the marginalized population. People saw themselves fighting for survival or with no economic alternative to employment as fighters, or they had no choice and joined out of fear for their lives. Foreign fighters made up a significant contingent, of ISIL ranks in particular. These movements eschewed political compromise, backed as they were by external supporters who provided better access to financing and sophisticated weapons than that enjoyed by non-Islamist opposition groups, and had command of the war economy, such as oil wells. Their power-building practices were broadly similar; charismatic, authoritarian leadership that was effective in mobilizing followers but excluded all those who did not accept their vision of Islam. ISIL acquired some of the attributes of Statehood, including heavy weaponry, oil resources, bureaucratic capacity, control over cities and the ability to provide a modicum of order and welfare where it governed. But the jihadists could not shift the balance of power against the Government and remained divided, despite the efforts of ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra to impose their domination.⁹

A civic alternative initially embodied in the Local Coordination Committees of Syria that led early anti-government protests, and the governing local councils they established, faltered. As the conflict and militarization deepened, local councils faced competition as people turned to more traditional authorities, such as tribal and religious notables and armed Islamist movements, which provided a measure of security. Islamist groups set up parallel institutions and often attacked the councils. Marginalized by violence and suffering from the mass exit of secularists from the Syrian Arab Republic, the councils halved in number, from 800 in 2012 to 400 in 2016, in parallel with the shrinking of their territory, from 40 per cent to 15 per cent of the country. They survived in the local interstices between the Government and jihadists, usually in hybrid forms, where elements of Islamist

militias and Sharia courts shared power with elected councils composed of more secular-minded activists and traditional notables, such as ulamā or Muslim scholars, and tribal leaders. Compared with the main warring sides, the councils were starved of resources and fragmented.

Later in the conflict, a growing wave of truces or de-escalation zones led to a patchwork of power-sharing arrangements on government/opposition front lines. The Government, facing manpower shortages that precluded the reconquest of opposition areas, resorted to imposing

settlements, piece by piece, via bombing and/or sieges, on the margins of areas it controlled. People were alienated, as opposition fighters were unable to shield them from the sieges and air assaults, and by their infighting over control of supplies and access points, personal power and doctrinal differences. It was often popular pressure that led fighters to accept government truces.¹⁰ These settlements or reconciliation agreements varied, from those amounting to virtual surrender to others in which ex-fighters remained in place but pledged loyalty to the Government and enjoyed some real autonomy.

2. Human rights violations and gender violence: an inescapable legacy

Rights violations, crimes of the conflict and lack of accountability threaten attempts at sustainable peace. The 2018 report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic for the United Nations Human Rights Office stated "... civilians have not only been the unintentional victims of violence, but have often been deliberately targeted through unlawful means and methods of warfare. Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and sexual and gender-based violence have all been used against thousands of persons in detention". In addition, the report says, "Vital civilian infrastructure has been decimated by repeated attacks on medical facilities, schools and markets. Humanitarian aid has been instrumentalized as a weapon of conflict with siege warfare and denial of life-saving assistance used to compel civilian communities and parties to the conflict, alike, to surrender or starve"¹¹ According to the Commission, "No party has abided by its obligations, either under international humanitarian or human rights law, to protect civilians, the infrastructure that protects civilian life and livelihoods or specially protected sites that form the backbone of their communities". Mass arrests, enforced disappearances, torture and death in custody were disturbingly widespread, it said.¹² A Human Rights Council report on children's rights, meanwhile, had revealed the scale of injustice befalling Syrian children: "Prolonged high-intensity conflict across the Syrian Arab Republic in 2017 had resulted in the highest verified number of grave violations against children since 2012. Widespread human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law affecting children had been committed by the Syrian authorities and by non-State armed groups. The scale, scope and gravity of crimes committed against children were shocking."¹³

Gender-based violations, rife almost since the onset of conflict, have reached unbearable levels. Moreover, while the worst causes occurred during and as a result of the conflict inside the country, violence and discrimination has continued to affect many Syrian women and girls after their displacement. A 2018 Human Rights Council paper on gender-based violence reveals that all parties committed grave violations against women, including rape and gang



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rape, and reports male detainees raped with objects and subjected to genital mutilation.¹⁴ Sexual violence was used to terrorize communities and extract confessions.

Despite ample documentation of mass gender-based violence, a Report of the United Nations Secretary-General in 2016, Situation of Human Rights in the Syrian Arab Republic, observes that due to cultural norms, gender violations may, in fact, be underreported.¹⁵

3. From normal economy to war economy

Fragmentation of governance and militarization in the Syrian Arab Republic transformed the economy. Even as the productive capacity of the normal economy declined, a war economy – lacking cohesion and with regional and transnational connections – grew, empowering a sector of middlemen, war profiteers, warlords, smugglers and a host of other intermediaries. It has also involved an increasing number of ordinary civilians desperate to identify an income-generating activity that could help sustain their families.

Economic deconstruction was driven by several forces. First, western-imposed sanctions, notably on the export of oil to Europe, greatly reduced government revenues and cut the banking system off from the west. Second, the increasing violence damaged production and infrastructure. A main watershed was the opposition takeover of Aleppo, where the industrial sector was looted and local business left for Turkey. And, finally, the eastern hydrocarbon and grain-producing areas were lost to the opposition.¹⁶

The most obvious symptom of the decline of the normal economy was the fall in production, income and investment. The total economic activity is estimated to have contracted by more than 54 per cent between 2011 and 2018, and the cumulative losses in GDP amounted to about 324.5 billion. In addition to the contraction of all productive sectors, there has been a depletion of household income and assets, inflation and rampant unemployment. It would be an exaggeration to suggest production ceased altogether; indeed, improved weather in the early years of the conflict increased agricultural output. In cities, low-grade industrial activity continued, and small workshops produced goods ranging from textiles to car generators.¹⁷

The Syrian Arab Republic's pre-conflict economy had well integrated infrastructure networks and nationwide institutions, though inequalities existed, particularly between regions. The onset of fragmentation was, however, an indication of deconstruction. Internal trade barriers sprang up, controlled by fighters levying taxes on the flow of goods. At the same time, the regions were more closely linked economically to the outside world than hitherto. As the Government lost control of the border hinterlands, widespread smuggling by pre-existing criminal networks or cross-border tribes proliferated. First, there was massive arms trafficking to the opposition, followed later by the smuggling of people, looted artefacts and, after the opposition took over the oil fields, crude oil outwards. Scarce items, including food, flowed inwards, much of it from Turkey.¹⁸ As internal production declined, inward flows of resources, including humanitarian aid and funding from opposition sponsors, became main prizes for which rivals competed.¹⁹ As such, a war economy was created around predatory and intermediary activities,



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rather than production. This raised transaction costs and prices for citizens, and living standards for the majority declined, though a few reaped significant profits. Control of supply chains and checkpoints between areas was lucrative, for government and opposition officers, creating a societal logic of sustainability.

Amid the economic decline, government delivery of basics, notably food and education, was still expected but became geographically differentiated. Widespread looting, coupled with regular attacks on storage and production facilities, reduced the capacity to collect grain and produce bread. Only 40 of the 140 wheat collection centres operating before the conflict survived. Many flourmills and bakeries remain closed. In areas controlled by the Government, "... it is rare that one finds a bakery without long lines, but [bread] is available for all"²⁰ By contrast, in opposition-held territories, shortages and supply disruptions meant bread was scarce. In 2015, the Government raised the price of a standard bread bundle (1.55 kg) to 35 Syrian pounds (SYP) or \$0.19, from 25 Syrian pounds, the second increase in seven months, apparently forced by the depletion of government resources.²¹

Food provision was also weaponized, with supplies cut to areas held by the opposition. The channelling of most humanitarian aid to government-approved zones

gave it considerable leverage over opposition fighters if they were unable to provide the basics for their putative constituents.²² Despite a United Nations resolution requiring the Government to provide access to areas controlled by the opposition, the increase in distribution was due largely to food being made available for displaced people fleeing into areas controlled by the government.

Starving besieged populations into submission was a strategy used frequently in the conflict.²³ Though mainly used by government forces in recapturing Syrian territory, including Al-Ghouta and parts of Aleppo, the tactic was practiced also by opposition forces, such as the siege of Nubl and Al-Zahraa from July 2012 to February 2016.

The war economy has transformed economic agency in the Syrian Arab Republic. Pre-conflict, economic leadership centred on alliances between the Government, including the public sector, and well-connected businesspeople. More than 90 per cent of enterprises were small and medium-sized, and lacked strong political connections. A potential objective of the international sanctions was to drive a wedge between the Government and capitalist class, the backbone of rule, particularly from 2000. Since the onset of conflict, more than 210 individuals and 70 entities have been added to the sanctions list.²⁴ This policy has largely failed, since many businesspeople have substantial investments in the country that outweigh their overseas assets and commercial interests. Hence, the majority remained highly invested in the Government's survival. Not only did business actors closest to the Government not defect, but because their stake in its survival increased, they also put parts of their wealth at its disposal, financing pro-government militias, for instance. As with other social actors, businesspeople are subject to a variety of direct and indirect pressures and it would be inaccurate to portray their actions as entirely pragmatic or voluntary.

Some of the old, large capitalist class did leave, while many small and medium-sized enterprises have survived in areas controlled by the Government. There was a huge capital flight to neighbouring countries, the conflict in Aleppo precipitating a widespread exit by firms to Turkey. Syrian-held foreign currency deposits, especially in banks along the Syrian-Turkish border, increased dramatically and Syrian investors became the primary source of new registered enterprises in Turkey. In 2014, more than 26 per cent of all new foreign companies in Turkey were established by Syrian investors, especially in the geographic borderlands of Gaziantep, Mersin and Kilis, from where they carried out economic activity in the Syrian Arab Republic. Many were supportive of the opposition. As Syrian businesspeople established enterprises outside the country, their capital became increasingly embedded, and immobile, and unlikely to readily return home.²⁵ The same applies for the most part to Syrian businesses established in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

In the vacuum, a new class of wealthy war profiteers emerged, thriving on the chaos, sanction-busting and

scarcities. These economic actors were to an extent favoured by the Government. A first group is made up of sanction-busters. As sanctions were targeted at businesspeople known to be closely aligned with the Government, an opportunity arose for second-rank little-known operators with external connections to replace them in arranging exchanges between Syrian public companies and external markets, such as importing commodities. The second group are the middlemen arranging economic deals crossing battle lines, for example, by facilitating exchanges between the Government and ISIL to ensure oil and gas continued to flow from eastern areas to State-run power plants further west.²⁶ Then in every area there are money changers, who have transferred up to \$5 million a day for a 1-2 per cent commission across battle lines.²⁷ The third group is made up of warlords taking cuts on economic flows; some commanders of pro-government militias became extremely rich and enjoyed extravagant lifestyles. Interestingly, their predatory activities gave rise to government-sponsored security companies whose function was to protect convoys from pro-government militias.²⁸ As academic Aaron Lund put it, a "veritable army of political fixers, entrepreneurs, and smugglers has emerged to provide the connective tissue" binding the fragmented nation, establishing deals where "the worst of enemies are also partners in business". This new economic elite was more decentralized than its pre-conflict counterpart; the tightly linked State-connected businesspeople have been replaced by a "many-headed hydra of armed actors running their own rent-seeking operations and trade networks."²⁹

Countries involved in the conflict have also maneuvered for a share in the new economy, particularly in strategic areas such as energy. One obstacle to post-conflict economic reintegration is that much of the hydrocarbons, and the hydropower capacity of the Tabqa Dam, are situated in areas controlled by the United States-backed, Kurdish-dominated SDF. Throughout the conflict, pragmatic economic deals have been reached to trade electricity for oil or gas, which can be expected to continue. In this respect, reconstruction may require formal planning, and investment agreements and legal arrangements to cross truce lines, a much more daunting prospect.



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D. The different manifestations of conflict internationalization

The internationalization of the conflict will be one of its enduring legacies. This has been particularly dramatic because, though the Syrian Arab Republic was moving towards an open economic system, it was one of the more inward-oriented countries in the region, and the world. The Government placed a premium on its economic and political sovereignty, which manifested itself in various ways, from its international economic treaties, to limiting and reducing the national debt in the 2000s and previously maintaining its food sovereignty. This relative self-sufficiency has been shattered by the conflict. At the same time, international actors – States and intergovernmental organizations – have acquired enhanced leverage over the Syrian Arab Republic's fate. Specifically, there is an international consensus on the need for a political solution (though it still seems distant), backed by several United Nations resolutions and multiple ongoing peace processes. Such political factors will inevitably impact on any reconstruction and reintegration of the divided economy, possibly obstructing it in the absence of a political settlement.

What are the manifestations of this internationalization? First, there is the direct military presence of several foreign countries, including Iran, the Russian Federation, Turkey and the United States, and their involvement in political and even humanitarian and economic affairs, albeit in different regions and to different degrees. Alongside these countries are others that became involved in political, diplomatic and financial support to various parties of the conflict, from countries of the European Union to those of the Gulf.

Second, was the Government's loss of control over its borders, which were contested by internal opposition groups, trans-State movements and external powers. Border control was crucial to taxing and controlling the flow of humanitarian aid, oil, fighters, smuggled goods and weapons into the Syrian Arab Republic from outside funders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and States, and exporting commodities such as oil. Battles took place over supply routes. As the State's control contracted, the Syrian Arab Republic's borderlands – boundaries in depth – became disputed areas where tribes and trans-State movements were empowered, and safe havens for fighters and platforms for international NGOs were concentrated. Opposition fighters depended on safe havens for rear bases and training facilities in neighbouring countries, and they selectively softened and hardened borders, seeking to intervene in the conflict, yet prevent spillover and blowback.³⁰

Third, despite the popular perception of a United Nations Security Council stalemate on the Syrian Arab Republic, there have been 23 resolutions since 2012.³¹ The scope of the resolutions is far reaching and includes a comprehensive political transition and solution to the conflict, human rights violations, the destruction

of chemical weapons stockpiles, counter-terrorism frameworks, humanitarian assistance and cross-border aid delivery, as well as targeting illegal trafficking and networks. The most significant is United Nations Security Council resolution 2254, which was unanimously adopted on 18 December 2015. It was the first to focus exclusively on a political solution and remains the underlying basis for the United Nations approach to the end of the conflict. The resolution affirmed that an inclusive and Syrian-led political process was the only sustainable solution, and called for the drafting of a new constitution and subsequent free and fair elections, establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers, continuity of governmental institutions, equality-based citizenship, unfettered humanitarian access, and the end of attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, and encouraged the full participation of women.³²

Fourth, multiple countries, mainly European ones and the United States, maintain international sanctions against Syrian government agencies and individuals.³³ These directly or indirectly affect most sectors of the economy. They target the Central Bank of Syria and the Commercial Bank of Syria directly, apply bans on trade with State economic institutions (on the import and transport of crude oil from the Syrian Arab Republic, and on investments in the Syrian oil industry), and ban Syrian financial institutions from establishing new correspondent banking relationships abroad.³⁴

Fifth, the presence of millions of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and Europe, and the international response necessary to assist and manage them, and to seek durable solutions, implies a multinational and multi-institutional effort. This has spawned an enormous industry with secondary and tertiary effects on international diplomacy and even domestic politics in the European Union, the United States and elsewhere. The spillover can be seen, for example, in the European Union-Turkey refugee deal of March 2016, which mixed refugee issues with geopolitical concerns.

Sixth, the devastating impact of the conflict and its destruction of national infrastructure and the economy has given rise to a wide international humanitarian presence in and around the country, which includes multinational institutions, regional and international NGOs, and foreign government humanitarian and relief organizations. These actors are increasingly involved in sustaining economic life and livelihood, another manifestation of how the Syrian Arab Republic has become internationalized.

Finally, there have been multiple parallel peace processes sponsored by international actors. The United Nations-led political initiative (known as the Geneva Process), based on resolution 2254 (2015) and facilitated by the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, has involved several rounds of negotiations, beginning with the June

2012 Geneva I Conference. Alongside, there has been an ensemble of initiatives, starting with the Astana process in January 2017, which focused on military and security issues. They resulted in a series of actions, most famously the creation of four de-escalation zones. By early 2020, the Astana process had gone through more than 12 rounds of negotiations. In early 2019, the United Nations Secretary-General appointed Geir Pederson as the fourth Special Envoy charged with leading international efforts to implement resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué. The focus has been on two aspects of

the resolution, namely establishment of a constitutional committee and internationally supervised elections. The final list of committee members was announced in September 2019.

By and large, however, 2019 and early 2020 saw momentum stalling in the settlement process due to external and internal factors, including the increased tightening of sanctions by the United States, the Turkish invasion of northern area, and the battle by the Government and allied forces to recapture Idlib.

E. A hopeful peace and precarious status quo

Armed combat had declined in most of the country as the conflict entered its ninth year. Despite the multiple peace processes, however, there has been no comprehensive political settlement. The Government regained control of large swathes of territory previously held by opposition groups and ISIL. This “new” status quo has had a positive impact, dramatically lowering rates of death and destruction but violence continues, quite heavily, in some parts of the country, and the potential for conflict relapse along new axes remains. Further, thousands of people remain imprisoned, displaced or missing.

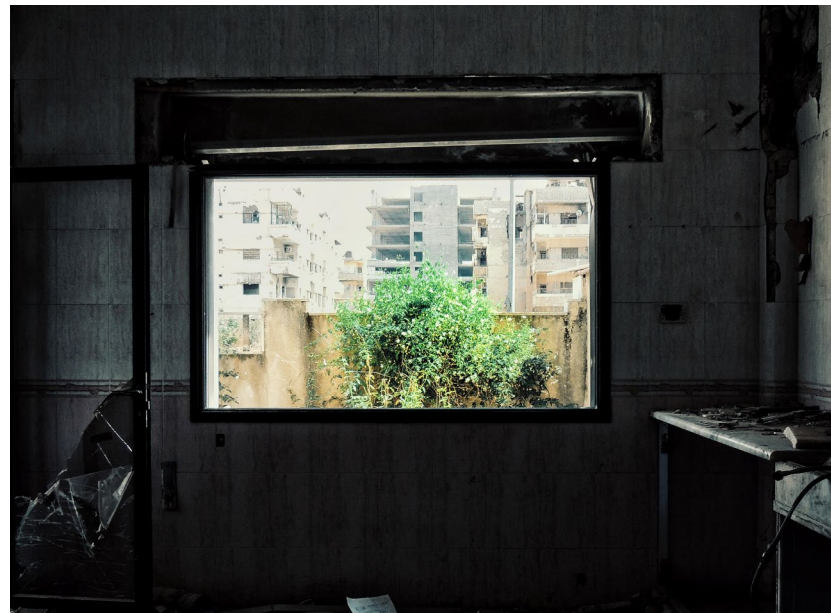
Syrians who have faced the brunt of the conflict are exhausted after almost a decade of it. Most yearn for normality and a relief from the fighting. They are now trying to come to terms with the legacy of violence, death and disability, and the collective trauma. Among large sectors of Syrian society inside and outside the country, there is no appetite for more conflict, or polarization, though this must not be confused with a willingness to reconcile or make peace with those regarded as having inflicted systematic violence on civilians. Long-lasting conflicts often overflow their borders, and for neighbouring countries that have faced a spillover, the reduction in violence suggests a regional escalation due to the Syrian conflict is less likely. With the reduction in fighting, a fledgling recovery is evident in some parts of the country, as well as a revival of economic linkages between countries in the region, vital for those such as Jordan and Lebanon.

On the other hand, the lack of a comprehensive agreement implies that the situation remains precarious. Two major areas in the north-west and north-east are outside government control. Any escalations could cause severe humanitarian catastrophes for a largely trapped and completely aid-dependent population. The DAA remains in the north-east, as well as the United States-led western coalition forces.

There is no declared intention, nor mechanism, for meaningful accountability and reconciliation for the gross violations and brutal crimes committed during the conflict. Sanctions entailed high costs on the Syrian

society as well as exacerbated the war economy. While economic recovery in some parts, particularly those experiencing complete destruction, is a positive, the lack of a comprehensive settlement implies piecemeal reconstruction that does not address the legacy of the war economy. This process may also reward warlords and continue a process of illegitimate wealth accumulation. Moreover, no settlement and the continued status quo do not address the root causes of the conflict, which it disempowers Syrian civil society. Deep poverty, food insecurity and social problems suggest deprivation rates are at alarming levels.

Any relapse would be devastating. A sustainable and inclusive process of peacebuilding is imperative, one that addresses the root causes as well as the transformations wrought by the conflict itself. There have been missed opportunities, but now is as good a time as any for all sides to engage in protracted peacemaking and peacebuilding – for the good of Syrians, the region and the world.



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