MIDDLE EAST/NORTH AFRICA 02.03.2017 | Lars Hauch

The UN's weak hand in Syria

The discussions taking place in Geneva on the future of Syria are of little relevance and weaken the United Nations' role as a mediator

A fresh round of talks has begun in Geneva with the goal of developing a political solution to the war in Syria. They are unlikely to be effective. The last such 'talks' in the Swiss city saw no direct contact between the delegations representing the armed opposition and the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In fact, Bashar al-Jaafari, Assad's chief negotiator, called his counterpart a terrorist and said he would have to shave his beard before talks could commence.

What is more, it is still unclear which points are up for negotiation. The spokesperson for United Nations (UN) envoy Staffan de Mistura said in late February that talks would be based on UN Resolution 2254, which talks about a new constitution and elections in Syria. However, she deliberately omitted any reference to a 'political transition' in a direct concession to the Syrian dictator who, in spite of a catalogue of crimes committed against his own people, still exercises a firm grip on the levers of power.

The self-fulfilling prophecy

President Assad's relatively stable position is unsurprising. The absolute chaos reigning in Syria means there is no alternative negotiating partner. Despite his dependency on military support from Iran and Russia, the President needn't fear a coup. The complex patchwork of insider deals, economic survival and the regional power structure provides – for the time being – a stable foundation for Assad's power in Syria.

Meanwhile, the opposition has seen its international clout dwindle due to a lack of partners and political strategies acceptable to the government. The war, now in its seventh year, has torpedoed the development of civil society and political consolidation in areas beyond Assad's control, and plays into the hands Islamist groups, who pay little heed to the Geneva talks.

Despite a December ceasefire, regime troops led by Lebanese militia group Hezbollah have besieged the Barada Valley where rebels have reportedly damaged essential water wells that service the capital. However, Bellingcat, a journalism network, attributes the damage to bombs from regime aircraft. The latest ceasefire Is just one of a long list of failed agreements, and Syrian and Russian fighter jets are again routinely bombing targets nationwide.

A patchwork of conflicts

In the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and Hama, a conflict has emerged between two major groups within the armed opposition: Ahrar al-Sham and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which has close ties to Al-Qaida. The split has marginalised the nationalist opposition. To ensure survival, smaller groups have had to choose a side. This means two larger alliances and a further name change for the jihadists, with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham becoming the most influential and deep-rooted Al-Qaeda movement in the region to date. A future war between these two alliances seems very likely as does the continuation of hostilities between the Islamists and pro-Assad troops. Without a political vision, there is no substance for talks or even a ceasefire.

Just a few kilometres north-east, large numbers of nationalist opposition fighters have gathered under Turkish protection to fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the Kurdish People's Protection Units, the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party. Though the IS is in retreat, the political vision for the region is limited to the establishment of temporary spheres of influence. Turkey's medium-term strategy is to control part of northern Syria and thereby stop the advance of Kurdish groups, whose autonomy Turkey will never tolerate. There's no sign of a long-term vision.

So the war in Syria drags on. External powers in both the regime and opposition camps are losing ground. Rebels in southern areas of the country have begun an offensive in Daraa, the provincial capital, launched without the blessing of the foreign backers.

Destructive diplomatic games

The United States' role in the conflict under new President Donald Trump will be decisive. With no clear strategy, we'll see more targeted attacks on jihadis and continued support for the Kurdish troops in the north of the country. Their Democratic Union Party is even building a

contact office in Washington. It's unlikely we'll see a sudden change in Washington's stance on Russia, given the mistrust and finger-pointing that has characterised the country's relationship till now. In the margins of the G20 conference in Bonn, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made clear that there will be no military cooperation with Russia until Moscow abandons its stance that all rebel groups are terrorists.

International diplomatic discussions on Syria have tended to push such details to the side-lines. The absence of a military agreement and political common denominators will likely prevent a break-through in the latest Geneva talks. Worse still, the United Nations has lost credibility. Meetings usually reflect the mantra that dialogue must continue, but if the UN continues to serve merely as a theatre for diplomatic one-upmanship it will lose even more of its vital soft power.



Lars Hauch
Münster

Lars Hauch works as a researcher and policy advisor for Conflict Mediation Solutions, a London-based consultancy specialising in Track II diplomacy.