

Executive Summary:

Hungry for Peace: positives and pitfalls of local truces and ceasefires in Syria

Internal potential for peace

Behind the images of blood and war in Syria, there exists among civilians both the desire for and the undeniable potential to achieve peace. This is being expressed in a growing number of bottom-up peace-making initiatives, despite the many obstacles in the way. Peace is indeed possible in Syria if an integrated model combining bottom-up and top-down approaches to peace is adopted. While local agreements can prove problematic in some areas, and have been co-opted as part of surrender policy or used as a military tactic by other forces, they have often delivered tangible improvements on the ground that top-level talks have singularly failed to achieve. If properly supported and observed, local deals could offer the best hope for alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people – by reducing levels of violence, providing safe havens within Syria, and offering access to humanitarian assistance. No top-level agreement is likely to succeed without the engagement and commitment of local actors in the process. Rather than being dismissed, local agreements must be considered an essential element of a broader, inclusive solution to the conflict.

While top-level talks and international efforts are vital, the humanitarian cost of the conflict has risen so dramatically that it is unacceptable to postpone international support for local peace initiatives until a top-level political deal is achieved. Previous top-level attempts to negotiate ceasefires in Syria had significant humanitarian impact, but this proved to be short-lived, as they did not successfully integrate local actors. Kofi Annan's April 2012 ceasefire led to an immediate 85 percent reduction in the number of deaths per day, and during the first three weeks of the deployment of UN monitors in Syria, there was a 24 percent decline in the numbers of deaths per week.

This conclusion is reached in the *Hungry for Peace Report* after presenting in depth academic analysis to both top down attempts and more than 35 different local negotiations in different parts of Syria, between October 2011 and the present time, using information gathered by field researchers inside Syria and from 45 interviews. It includes case studies on Homs, the Damascus countryside, Ras al-Ain and the provision of services in Dara'a and Aleppo. Some of the researchers themselves have brokered several deals and taken part in mediating some others. Such local deals have been brokered since the first year following the uprising in Syria, though they went largely unreported in the media as a result of the need for secrecy around the deals and because opinion in opposition circles was hostile to any negotiations with the Syrian authorities.

What motivates and enhances local ceasefires deals?

Armed factions are primarily influenced by pressure from civilians to engage in local negotiations. In many cases, the provision of services has proved a strong motivation for parties to the conflict to talk and collaborate, and in the most part this collaboration has resulted in important improvements in humanitarian conditions. Military stalemate, and the realization that a military victory is not possible is another key motive for entering into negotiations. In some cases studied, the desire to negotiate ceasefires was motivated by military and tactical considerations, or as a way to access to strategic resources.

Each region of Syria has different socio-political dynamics, influenced by interrelated factors including ethnicity, religion, economic development, and the security situation. The incentives for local ceasefires and mechanisms required to maintain them reflect this diversity, and vary considerably from one location to another. Local leaders inside Syria better understand their constituents and are better able to mobilize them than the leadership in exile. The nature of the events inside Syria means that a unified leadership is unlikely to emerge. Among all the groups in Syria, local civil society (including traditional leaderships and civic councils) should have a more prominent role, as it has the ability to communicate and mediate between the actors within and outside Syria to reach a peaceful settlement. Engaging with and enabling civil society actors is crucial to achieving sustainable ceasefires, delivering humanitarian aid, and providing basic services.

Obstacles to home-grown peace

The most intractable obstacles to home-grown peace deals, beside the lack of political will at the top Syrian and international levels, are the vested interests of regional actors and the growing war economy. The conflict is being fuelled by international and regional actors who, by providing arms, funding, and encouragement to myriad competing parties, are creating disincentives to peace-making at every level. Many local deals were spoiled because of direct regional influence and interference. Negotiations meetings often include actors directly supported by regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Iran and in some cases Iranian officers were present in these meetings. For this reason, consensus among international and regional players is essential. Just as it was possible to reach an agreement on the removal of chemical weapons, it is possible to devise peace deals in Syria if regional and international actors focus their support on the solution rather than on the parties to the conflict.

Warlords and warring parties have also developed an economic interest in the continuation of violence as observed in Homs. This war economy, which is accelerated by economic sanctions, is beginning to take strong hold over the conflict at many levels, further undermining the chances of peace.

The absence of a third party that can facilitate and monitor local agreements is another reason why many attempts for building peace on the ground in Syria have failed or have shown limited progress. Other obstacles include the increasingly fractured and complex nature of the armed actors on both sides, both of which groups hold a diverse range of motivations for prolonging the fighting.

Recommendations

1. Neither the bottom-up approach to peace nor the top-down one is likely to deliver significant results on its own. A new, combined and integrated model is needed. Significant progress in reaching peace in Syria can only happen if local factors are considered in the context of the regional and international situation.
2. Local ceasefire agreements should be an essential part of any solution, but they need to be part of a larger, comprehensive central peace plan.
3. Outside Syria, there should be a greater focus on achieving agreements among the international and regional parties before attempting to foster any significant progress among Syrian parties engaged in top-level talks. There must be clear agreements and commitments among the international and regional parties to support peace and de-escalate the conflict. In particular, the flow of arms from outside states must be halted. All parties should honour agreements not to capitalize on ceasefires to rearm military units while the ceasefire holds.
4. Inside Syria, the international community should upscale its presence and engagement on all levels. This should include:
 - international mediators that can support and advise local civil mediators and help to facilitate local deals;
 - international monitors in areas where violence is not intense and where local peace deals are reached, and peacekeepers in violent areas, with a Chapter VI (UN Charter) mandate;
 - humanitarian and relief agencies, the presence and engagement of which has proved to be an incentive for truces;
 - consideration of Syrian-composed, civil society-based mediation teams and monitoring forces;
 - assistance in facilitating the demobilization of fighters, their reintegration into civilian life and protection, as part of a broader political process and the cessation of armed violence.
5. It is essential for sustainable peace that Syria's war economy is undermined. By tracing the revenue sources of the various warring parties and their associated networks, it ought to be possible to identify levers to weaken the capacity, the will, and the effectiveness of violent actors. The effect of general sanctions imposed on Syria in accelerating the war economy should be considered in this respect.
6. Priority should be given to engagement with local leaderships inside Syria, whether military, civil, or traditional, since they are far more able to mobilize their constituents and understand their needs than leadership outside the country. While communicating with one, presumably unified, exiled leadership can be more convenient, it is far less effective.
7. Civil society (by which we mean civil organizations, traditional leaderships, and, on occasion, local business) must be engaged and empowered. Among all the actors in Syria, it is the only one that is able to liaise with all other groups in order to reach peace. Engaging with and enabling civil society is crucial to success in reaching ceasefires, delivering humanitarian aid, and providing basic services.