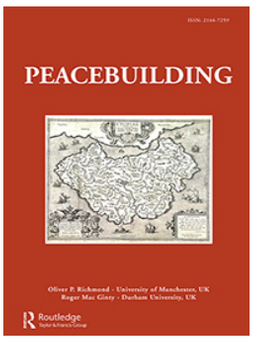

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How local are local agreements? Shaping local agreements as a new form of third-party intervention in protracted conflicts

Rim Turkmani

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How local are local agreements? Shaping local agreements as a new form of third-party intervention in protracted conflicts

Rim Turkmani

LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Based on two case studies from Syria, this article argues that unilateral external intervention in protracted conflicts is not only about military and financial support to one or other warring party. Unilateral external actors often get involved in the negotiation of local agreements, creating a hybrid form of intervention that combines the roles of warfighting, mediation, and policing. In this context, external actors are able to transform their military, financial and logistical support to states and non-state armed groups into leverage and negotiating power that determines the outcome of local negotiations, thereby gearing the dynamics of the conflict towards their own interests and away from the local agenda. This hybrid external intervention may, in some circumstances, contribute to an unjust and uncertain stabilisation process, while in other circumstances, it can undermine local peace efforts. The clear implication is the need for a greater role and mandate for multilateral actors.

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Introduction

In a seminal article about external intervention in civil wars, Elbadawi and Sambanis distinguish between two modes of intervention.[1] The first is defined as a 'unilateral intervention by one (or more) third-party government(s) in a civil war in the form of military, economic or mixed assistance in favour of either the government or the rebel movement involved in the civil war'. The second is intervention aimed at achieving peace that they define as 'multilateral and essentially neutral, aiming at an impartial resolution of conflicts (e.g. peacekeeping and peacemaking)'.[2] They argue that these two modes of intervention are very different in terms of their potential impact on conflicts, a view that is echoed in the third-party intervention literature. Indeed, they also find that these unilateral external interventions tend to lengthen the duration of civil war.

In this article, I make the argument that unilateral external intervention is not only about military, logistical and financial support to one or other warring party in a protracted conflict. Unilateral external actors often get involved in the negotiation

CONTACT Rim Turkmani r.turkmani@lse.ac.uk

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[1]Ibrahim Elbadawi and Nicholas Sambanis, 'External Interventions and the Duration of Civil Wars. World Bank Development Economic Research Group (Decrg) Conference on "the Economics and Politics of Civil Conflicts"', (2000).

[2]ibid.

of local agreements, creating a hybrid form of intervention that combines the roles of warfighting, mediation, and policing. Indeed, external actors are able to transform their military, financial and logistical support to states and non-state armed groups into a source of 'leverage' or negotiating power that determines the outcome of local negotiations and agreements. However, unlike traditional mediation approaches where leverage by mediators is brought to bear on the parties in order to shape their incentives and press them to reach an agreement, leverage by third-party actors in Syria has been used to gear the dynamics of the conflict towards their own external interests and away from local agendas.[3] External actors may act as spoilers because their interest is in protracted violence. In other cases, they may aim to stabilise the situation but in ways that are conducive to their interests rather than the interests of local actors.

To substantiate this argument, I have undertaken two case studies of local negotiation processes in Syria between 2013 and 2017. The first is in the governorate of Homs and the second is what has become known as the 'four towns' agreement. Throughout these processes, several agreements were negotiated; in the early period, local actors took the initiative, but over time, external actors became involved, and sidelined the local actors. In both cases, despite pressures from local actors, the United Nations was unable to get involved because of the narrowness of its mandate and the rejection of its role by the government.

To develop the case studies, I made use of the Local agreements in Syria Archive (LASA) which I have developed over seven years of research and also direct involvement in some of the local agreements. The LASA archive contains documents related to the local agreement process such as the agreements themselves, both signed and in different draft iterations, interviews with mediators and negotiators, statements made by actors and communications with external actors and the UN.[4] Although the full LASA archive is not publicly available, I made public the relevant agreements and documents cited in this paper for both the case studies.[5] I also conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with some of the mediators and negotiators of the agreements in the case studies between 2014 and 2021. For security reasons, the names of the interviewees are not revealed. I was also personally involved in the negotiation process in Homs and drew on insights from my own experiences. The account of the case studies in this paper is based mainly on these interviews and on LASA. For the conflict events, I made use of the daily events archive of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.[6]

This article also speaks to the growing literature on the agency of non-state armed groups.[7] It has been noted that non-state armed groups understand well that their agency does not come only from the exercise of violence but also from non-violent sources,

[3]See, e.g.I. William Zartman and Saadia Touval, 'International Mediation: Conflict Resolution and Power Politics', Journal of social issues 41, no. 2 (1985): 27–45.;Lindsay Reid, 'Finding a Peace That Lasts: Mediator Leverage and the Durable Resolution of Civil Wars', The Journal of conflict resolution 61, no. 7 (2017): 1401–31.

[4]More on LASA underRim Turkmani, 'Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria', Peacebuilding (2022).

[5]Local agreements in Syria Archive (LASA), LASA Homs available at https://doi.org/10.21953/LSE.5RHQLOY7V1PN, LASA Four towns available at https://doi.org/10.21953/lse.ml4q68jwi0vx

[6]The archive is available at https://www.syriahr.com/

[7]For example,Ersel Aydinli, 'Assessing Violent Nonstate Actorness in Global Politics: A Framework for Analysis', Cambridge review of international affairs 28, no. 3 (2015): 424–44.;David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede. Gleditsch, and Idaean. Salehyan, 'Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset', Conflict management and peace science 30, no. 5 (2013): 516–31.

including having their own foreign relations and foreign policy.[8] Coggins coined the term 'rebel diplomacy' to describe the external ties rebel groups develop, which bring them not only material support but also a role in 'concluding trade agreements, or being allowed to participate in cease-fire or settlement negotiations', unlocking strategic advantages.[9] The work of San-Akca, based on a dataset of non-state armed groups, gives further insight into the relations between states and non-state armed actors.[10] She demonstrates how the use of non-state actors as a state-based foreign policy tool has become a growing trend after WWII, noting that 65% of support for non-state armed groups comes from external states.

This literature like the article by Elbadawi and Sambanis is primarily situated within a traditional 'civil war' framework, where states confront rebels defined as non-state actors. This study was undertaken as part of the Conflict Research Programme, which uses terms like protracted conflict or 'new wars'[11] rather than civil war, to describe a violent context characterised by numerous armed groups or networks that comprises both state and non-state elements and that are both local and global. The two case studies graphically illustrate the role of armed groups on all sides and their complex relations with external actors.

Local agreements are attracting increasing interest in scholarly literature. The growing importance of these local agreements poses a challenge to the IR theory and its reluctance to to engage with peace negotiations beyond the dominant state-centric approach. The emerging complex image of these local agreements, and their tendency not to follow traditional negotiation models make them difficult to fit within either the liberal or the realist approaches to peace.[12] Within the same agreement we can observe actors trying to impose victor-peace based on their partial military victory, others trying to impose liberal peace by focusing on institutions and others following a realist approach trying to achieve a balance of power.

In what follows, I start by outlining the evolution of external intervention in the Syrian war. This is followed by the two case studies. In the final section, I draw out the main findings from the two case studies and, in particular, the implication for multilateral actors.

External intervention in the Syrian conflict

There are two well-established characteristics of the Syrian conflict. First, it is complex and highly fragmented.[13] And second, shortly after it started it became a crowded arena for a proxy war where international and regional actors supported conflict actors on all sides.[14] The fragmentation took on several forms, including the splitting of the country

[8]Eli. Berman and David Lake, A., *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).
[9]Bridget L. Coggins, 'Rebel Diplomacy: Theorizing Violent Non-State Actors' Strategic Use of Talk', in *Book Rebel Diplomacy: Theorising Violent Non-State Actors' Strategic Use of Talk*, Editor (2015).
[10]Belgin San-Akca, *States in Disguise: Causes of State Support for Rebel Groups*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[11]Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, Third edition. ed. (Cambridge, England; Malden, Massachusetts: Polity, 2012).
[12]For more on the IR theory engagement see Chapter 4 in Oliver Richmond, Sandra Pogodda, and Jasmin Ramovic, *The Palgrave Handbook of Disciplinary and Regional Approaches to Peace*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016).
[13]Samer Nassif Abboud, *Syria*, (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2015).
[14]Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

into what is now three different areas of control, namely government areas, the zone under the control of Kurdish-led forces and the disconnected areas under armed opposition control. Between 2013 and 2017, security fragmentation was at its highest point. Some areas, mainly under opposition control, were even besieged by forces from the opposing side. As hopes for a national political solution were fading and with very slow progress in the UN-led Geneva track, a series of locally brokered agreements started to sprout up in Syria, mainly to resolve issues in besieged and difficult to access areas.[15] In 2012 and 2013, many local actors were negotiating agreements in different parts of Syria, such as in Hameh, Barzeh and Hama.[16] As the role of external actors increased in the conflict, particularly in arming conflict actors and/or fighting alongside them, so did their interference in these local agreements, this interference was identified as one of the main spoilers of locally brokered peace agreements.[17]

Not all local agreements in Syria were subject to strong external intervention. A full examination of local agreements, comparing those with and those without external intervention, is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I examine how some of the most prominent local agreements in Syria were influenced and exploited by external actors.

The forms and types of external interventions in the Syrian conflict are hugely varied. For the interest of this paper, I focus on external support for the main armed actors examined in this paper – primarily Iran and Russia behind the Syrian government and the Gulf states and Turkey behind the opposition. In what follows, I review in brief their forms of support.

Russian–Syrian relations are historically strong and go back to the Soviet era during which the Soviet Union played a leading role in the formation and equipping of the Syrian Army. After the conflict, Russia continued to politically support the Syrian government in the international arena, especially at the U.N Security Council. In September 2015, Russia, with military bases already in the country, upscaled their support by intervening militarily directly on the government's behalf and expanding its airbase in Hmeimim. This became the military and political hub of Russian involvement in Syria. From there, airforce missions against opposition groups were launched.[18] Hemeimim quickly expanded to include a centre for monitoring the ceasefire that was agreed in February 2016 and a reconciliation centre that reached out to the Syrian opposition in an attempt to broker local truces.[19]

While Iran's support for the Syrian government also predates the conflict, it escalated after the conflict began and took on novel forms. Besides a credit line exceeding seven billion dollars, Iran deployed its own Al-Quds brigade, the external arm of the Iranian Republican Guard forces, to fight alongside the Syria government in areas of interest to their country. Iran also promoted local popular militias, resulting in what

[15]See, for example, Dogukan Cansin Karakus and Isak Svensson, 'Between the Bombs: Exploring Partial Ceasefires in the Syrian Civil War, 2011–2017', Terrorism and Political Violence 32, no. 4 (2020): 681–700. and R Turkmani et al., 'Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria', (2014).
[16]R Turkmani et al., 'Hungry for Peace: Positives and Pitfalls of Local Truces and Ceasefires in Syria', (2014).
[17]ibid.
[18]Younes Ahmed. 'The Transformed Role of the Hmeimim Base'. *The Arab Weekly*, 25/03/2016, https://thearabweekly.com/transformed-role-hmeimim-base.
[19]The full name is 'The Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Control of the Movement of Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic'

Aboud has described as the 'militiafication' of government territory.[20] These are mainly the National Defence Forces (NDF), which are paramilitaries loyal to the Syrian government, and other Shia brigades. Iran played the sectarian card by recruiting militias members from the Shia and Alawite (considered a sub-sect of the Shia) communities in Syria.[21]

The main external supporters for the Syrian opposition are the Sunni majority Gulf states and private donors as well as Turkey. They supported armed groups from Arab Sunni backgrounds. While support also came from the US and European countries, these are not the most relevant to the cases studied in this paper. Private Gulf donors were amongst the first external actor to step in to generously fund and fundraise for the Syrian armed opposition. Baylouny and Mullins note:

> The story of Syria's opposition is indelibly linked to external resources. Money was no problem: the Gulf states and private funders of the opposition in the conflict had resources above and beyond what normal states and their citizens could be expected to contribute.[22]

Qatar also provided substantial support for the armed opposition at a state level. By May 2013, Qatar reportedly spent three billion USD in support of the Syrian rebels and delivered the most weapons, with more than 70 military cargo flights into neighbouring Turkey.[23] Qatar also operated as a training ground for Syrian rebels with a training programme provided by U.S. military forces.[24]

However, Saudi Arabia was the largest Gulf state supporter of Syrian rebels, even though it ended its support in 2017. Saudi was the main financier of the multibillion USD Timber Sycamore CIA run programme that provided training, finance and arms to Syrian rebels in 2012–2013.[25] It also directly financed the purchase of weapons for Syrian rebels from Eastern European countries and from Libya.[26]

Turkey's support for Syrian rebels was also substantial, but it remained mainly logistical and political support, especially as the only international borders the opposition-controlled areas have are with Turkey, making it essential for the delivery of military, financial and humanitarian support. Since the beginning of 2017, Turkey established Turkish Observation and military posts in northwest Syria which are meant to observe and guard the implementation of the de-escalation agreement signed between Russia, Turkey and Iran.[27]

[20]S Abboud, 'The Economics of War and Peace in Syria, Stratification and Factionalization in the Business Community', Editor (2017).
[21]Hilu Pinto, in *Shattered Nation; the Sectarianisation of the Syrian Conflict*, chap. Shattered Nation; the Sectarianisation of the Syrian Conflict, (London: Hurst & Company, 2017).
[22]Anne Marie Baylouny and Creighton A. Mullins, 'Cash Is King: Financial Sponsorship and Changing Priorities in the Syrian Civil War', Studies in conflict and terrorism 41, no. 12 (2017): 990–1010.
[23]R. Khalaf. 'Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms'. *Financial Times*, 16 May 2013 2013, http://ig-legacy.ft.com/content/86e3f28e-be3a-11e2-bb35-00144feab7de#axzz6aHONCeeP.
[24]N Youssef. 'Syrian Rebels Describe U.S.-Backed Training in Qatar'. *Frontline*, 26 May 2014 2014, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/syrian-rebels-describe-u-s-backed-training-in-qatar/.
[25]M Mazettii. 'Behind the Sudden Death of a $1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria'. *The New Yourk Times* 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html?auth=login-google.
[26]C J Chiver. 'Saudis Step up Help for Rebels in Syria with Croatian Arms'. *New York Times*, 25 February 2013 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all.
[27]Mena Research Center. 'Turkish Observation Posts in North Syria, How and Why?'. 2020, https://mena-studies.org/turkish-observation-posts-in-north-syria-how-and-why/.

Case studies

The case of Homs

It is in Homs where we find the very first local agreements to become overwhelmingly influenced by external actors. Some key elements of the Homs agreements even became the model for later local agreements. The development of six years of local talks in Homs is outlined in another paper in this issue.[28] Here, I focus in particular on how external actors interfered with local processes.

By mid-2013, three main disconnected areas of the governorate of Homs were under armed opposition control. The first two were the old city and the suburb of Al-Waer. Both were subject to a brutal siege imposed by government forces and its loyalist militias. The third was the northern countryside.

Several rebel groups operated in these three areas. Deep divisions and rivalries between them were rampant. One of the main armed opposition actors inside the besieged areas was part of the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF).[29] SIF championed Sunni Islamic theocracy and was funded by Gulf sources.[30]

On the Syrian government side, the main armed actors were the Syrian Arab Army and various militias, mainly the sectarian NDF and the al-Rida brigade. The latter was a militia recruited mainly by Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah from the Shia villages in Homs on the outskirts of the besieged al-Waer.[31] The direct and indirect presence of opposing regional powers in Homs was strong and fell clearly along sectarian lines, exacerbating sectarian tensions in the city.

In the second half of 2013, a major Syrian mediation initiative began, aimed at finding a peaceful solution for the entire governorate of Homs.[32] It was driven by the stalemate on both the military and the top-level political tracks and by the dire situation facing civilians. The process was led by Dr Amin Helwani, a medical doctor from Homs. He was very well positioned to lead a Syrian mediation initiative, as he had contacts and respect on both sides. His nephew was one of the opposition leaders inside the besieged areas, whilst his childhood friend was a high-level official in the presidential palace. He formed a core mediation group of lawyers and doctors from Homs who lived outside the besieged area so that they could move back and forth in their shuttle diplomacy. The essence of the initiative was that it was holistic and Syrian-led. They wanted a solution for the whole governorate with both opposition-controlled and regime-controlled areas, and one that would address the roots of the grievances of the people.

Well aware of the role of Gulf donors in influencing the opposition, Helwani started his mediation with a visit to Saudi Arabia where he met with key donors of the opposition to lobby support for his initiative.[33] After he went back to Syria, he developed his peace plan through a consultative process including people from all

[28]Rim Turkmani, 'Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria', Peacebuilding (2021). Submitted.
[29]A. Lund, 'Syria's Salafi Insurgents: The Rise of the Syrian Islamic Front', Editor (2013).
[30]Ibid and alsoTHOMAS PIERRET, 'Brothers in Alms: Salafi Financiers and the Syrian Insurgency', Carnegie Middle East Center (2018).
[31]MOHANAD HAGE ALI, 'The Shi'a Revival', Carnegie Middle East Center (2017), https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/69819.
[32]Interviews with mediators in August 2014, see alsoWalid Al-Fares, *Homs: The Great Siege. A Chronicle of 700 Days of Blockade*, (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies 2015).
[33]ibid.

sides and called it a Stabilisation Framework for Homs. The end goal was to return normalcy to life in the city, to address local complaints on all sides and to avoid any displacement. The articles included a ceasefire, the release of detainees, the return of internally displaced people, the re-opening of local markets, lifting the siege, and removing checkpoints. It also addressed the right of university students and civil servants, who had lost their positions due to their political stances, to go back to the University or their job. It called for an end to arbitrary arrests, a commitment to fight extremist elements on both sides, and an end to hate speech and inflammatory language. For the rebels, the framework proposed gradual disarmament and integration solutions rather than deportation to other opposition-controlled areas. It also proposed that once this framework was agreed upon by local actors, it should then be taken to Geneva to be endorsed by the UN-led process.[34]

After securing initial approval from the opposition to his plan, the mediating team travelled to Damascus. They met with Syrian officials at the presidential palace. They officials asked them to also go with their proposal to the Iranian embassy. There, they were told that the only offer Iran was ready to accept was for the rebels to hand in all their heavy weapons and to be deported out of Homs to the opposition-controlled areas. The mediators could not accept the offer, knowing that the opposition would never accept these terms. They returned to the presidential palace for more meetings with an official who had been delegated to oversee the talks. The official asked them to return to Homs and cut a deal with the head of the Iranian-supported NDF in Homs. They met with him, and the only offer he made was to allow the civilians to leave the besieged areas 'with their hands up' while his forces 'crush the armed opposition'. This marked the end of the first Syria civic mediation attempt. At this stage, requests were sent to the UN Special envoy to Syria to assist the mediation. However, the Syrian government did not allow the UN Geneva team to play any mediation role at the local level. It tried to confine it to assisting implementation of some terms of the agreements, such as delivering aid or overseeing civilian evacuations.

With no solution in place, the humanitarian situation inside the besieged old city continued to deteriorate. On the 6th of March 2014, Dr Helwani resumed his mediation efforts. A new opposition negotiation committee (ONC) had been formed and included representatives from the old city and al-Waer. It was given a strong mandate by both the civilians and the rebels, although some remained very sceptical about negotiated solution. The ONC mandated the mediation team to resume negotiations.[35] Starting from his previous framework, Dr Helwani again refused to negotiate each part of the city on its own. After some initial talks in Damascus, he secured an invitation to the ONC for top-level talks in Damascus with a guarantee for their safety. The departure of the ONC to Damascus was delayed for several reasons, and eventually the minister of national reconciliation was delegated to go to Homs and lead the talks. Since this minister had minimal power, the opposition saw this as a sign that the government was not serious about the talks. Nevertheless, the ONC met with him several times.

[34]Private communications with the mediators, April 2014.
[35]See the mandate letter at LASA Homs, page 7.

During this period, the head of the ONC, a local Sheikh, was aware of the regional threat to the process. He sent a letter through me to the UN envoy to Syria saying

> The international community has always called for a Syrian-led solution, and here we are crafting the solution from inside Syria and all we want from the outside world is that it is not the obstacle in the way of this solution.

He requested the UN to open an office in al-Waer to monitor and assist the local peace process and warned against the potential regional role in sabotaging the process:

> Direct and indirect regional and international interference by influencing the actors supported by the regional parties has hindered our previous efforts to reach an agreement. We think it is vital either to offset this regional confrontation on the land of Homs, or to use their ability to leverage the Syrian actors they support to abide by the terms of the agreement that we reach. For our part, we pledge to exclude any international or regional influence on the decision of the opposing parties to this agreement. In return, we demand pressure to limit and prevent any regional or other international interference to obstruct the course of the agreement and its implementation.

Again, the UN responded that they were unable to assist, citing the government's rejections of UN involvement as the main reason. The ONC continued trying to negotiate an agreement when, at the end of April 2014, news emerged about another agreement regarding the old city of Homs being brokered in parallel in Turkey. The talks included representatives from Iran, Hezbollah and the Gulf-supported SIF. In Homs, people knew nothing about these negotiators apart from the head of the SIF associated brigade.

This agreement was a bitter blow to the local Syrian mediators and the ONC. The opposition formed a new alternative committee to discuss the specifics of the implementation of the externally-agreed agreement in a series of meetings with the government.

Dr Helwani was invited by the government to one of those meetings at al-Safir hotel on the 2nd of May. In the meeting, he was informed of the terms of the new agreement. It called for the complete evacuation of the old city to the opposition-controlled northern countryside. In return, the opposition would allow humanitarian aid to go into the Nubul and Zahraa, Shia majority villages besieged by the rebels, and the release of more than 70 abductees by the SIF, including Iranian abductees. At the meeting, attended by an Iranian official who soon became a regular in all negotiation meetings in Homs over the next two years, Dr Helwani voiced his disapproval of the agreement saying that it would not be good for Homs before leaving the meeting angry. While walking home from the meeting, he was kidnapped by people driving a car in an area that was controlled by government forces. His family and friends have not heard any news about him since.

The opposition delegation had no choice but to attend further meetings to discuss the implementation of the agreement. However, they insisted that a representative from the UN should also be present. The UN resident coordinator attended the meetings as well as government representatives and the Iranian official. Two of the attendees described the Iranian official as the one with the last word in all the meetings. They also spoke of the intervention of the UN resident coordinator, which added a human element to the agreement. With Iranian demands for a UN-supervised delivery of aid to the besieged Shia villages, he insisted that the UN also provide aid to the Sunni villages, equally in need of aid, that the convoy would pass en route to the Shia villages.

The agreement was implemented on the 8th of May, but it only involved the old city. Al-Waer, which was home to hundreds of thousands of civilians, remained under siege. Negotiations resumed and lasted until September 2016. There would be periods of calm when the talks were making progress followed by violence when the talks appeared to be falling apart.[36] Attempts to spoil these talks came from Iranian-supported militias.[37]

The Iranian official was again a regular in the Al-Waer negotiation meetings. In one of the meetings, the opposition posed the question of who would play the role of guarantor of the agreement. With the Iranians offering to play that role, an article was added to the draft of the agreement that stated 'To open an office for the Iranian mediator in the neighbourhood to address any violation or disregard to the agreement'. The opposition agreed to this, hoping it would put an end to the aggression of Iranian-supported militias and dissuade them from spoiling the agreement.[38]

During this period, the Damascus representative of the UN Special envoy to Syria visited Al-Waer in November 2014 and met with the ONC. The opposition requested that the UN play a role in mediating the talks, but the Syrian government refused once again.

In September 2016, an agreement was reached to evacuate a number of fighters and civilians from al-Waer.[39] The government asked the UN to take part in the evacuation as it involved going through areas inaccessible to the regime. But the UN refused, as it did not want to be seen as part of the implementation of a displacement plan. This evacuation was not the end of strife in al-Waer. Armed opposition remained in control of al-Waer and many civilians feared arrest should government forces enter the area.

At the end of September 2016, a Russian official from its reconciliation centre in Hmemim communicated with the opposition in al-Waer. They put forward a plan resembling the government's plan, which prompted the opposition to reject it and instead demand a return to the previous August 2016 draft agreement.[40] Soon after this was rejected by the Russians, a very intense military campaign against al-Waer began following this exchange killing at least 55 civilians.[41]

The campaign pressured the ONC to return to the talks. They met with Russian officials on the 6th of March 2017, who handed them a ceasefire agreement written in Arabic and Russian in the form of ready-made template with blanks to fill in the name of the local area.[42] The first party was stipulated to be the people of the local area expressing their loyalty to 'the president and the government' and pledging that they were ready to 'support the Syria army in its war against armed-men and mercenaries' and to 'help the local authorities, the police and governmental directorates to bring back peaceful life in . . . '. The second party was stipulated to be the Syrian authority who pledged to offer 'support and protection' and to do what it had to do to resume local services and facilities. The third party was stipulated to be the 'Reconciliation centre of Russian Federation' tasked with monitoring the implementation of the agreement, guaranteeing to investigate

[36]Rim Turkmani, 'Local Agreements as a Process: The Example of Local Talks in Homs in Syria', Peacebuilding (2021),ibid.
[37]ibid.
[38]Hamidi. 'Permanent Office for the Iranian Mediator in Al-Waer'. 8/6/2014, https://sqqr247.blogspot.com/2014/06/blog-post_153.html.
[39]LASA Homs, pages 16–18.
[40]See the previous plan in LASA Homs, pages 19–21.
[41]The records of the Syrian observatory for human rights, https://bit.ly/374SGgf, also include similar figures
[42]LASA Homs, page 22.

any violations and assist if necessary. In the meeting, the ONC attempted to explain that a ready-made template could not accommodate the specifics of the area and required a more tailor-made agreement.

Further meetings with Russian officials were more effective and resulted in a ceasefire agreement, also in the form of a bilingual template.[43] This was signed by the opposition in al-Waer and stamped by the Russian reconciliation centre. It was seen as a better fit for al-Waer. Rather than pledge loyalty to the president, it included a pledge to join a 'peaceful settlement for the armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic' and to cease attacks on the Syrian army. It was also complemented by a broader plan titled 'The suggested plan by the Russian friends to resolve the conflict in al-Waer in Homs in stages'.[44] In the first stage, the plan included a pledge to provide a settlement for all rebels who were ready to stop fighting and hand in their arms. It guaranteed safe exit for those refusing to do so in addition to providing safety for civilians. In its latter stages, the plan included steps to resolve the problems felt by the local population including the return of services and facilities. While the plan was an improvement from the first version, the opposition had its objections, mainly that it ignored the issue of detainees and lacked a protection mechanism for those wishing to enrol in the settlement process. Furthermore, only a limited number of the opposition could leave al-Waer. In response to protection concerns, the Russians suggested the deployment of the Russian military police. After several more meetings, a final agreement was reached on 13 March 2017 and signed by representatives from Al-Waer, the government, and the Russians.[45] This plan included more details on protection mechanisms and an amnesty to army defectors, with the condition they re-join the army after six months. It also allowed for safe exit for more people. The task of implementing the agreement and addressing violations was given to a committee comprising the agreement's signatories. The agreement was implemented and around 20,000 people were evacuated to opposition-controlled areas.[46] Slowly al-Waer began to return to normal as physical violence ended, more people went back, and more facilities were restored.

The four towns' agreements

Zabadani and Madaya are two neighbouring towns in the countryside of Damascus. Within the framework of what became known as 'the four towns agreement', their destiny became intimately tied to that of Kefraya and Foua, Shia towns controlled by loyalist militias and besieged by the rebels in Idleb.[47]

Sitting on the top of a mountain on the Syrian-Lebanese border, Zabadani and Madaya were considered military strategic locations by Hezbollah. They joined the civic public movement early in 2011 and by early 2012, rebel groups became active in the towns. At various periods, they took full control leading to clashes with the government and Hezbollah, who also imposed a siege on the towns. Between 2012 and early

[43] *Ibid.*
[44] LASA Homs, page 23.
[45] LASA Homs, pages 24–25.
[46] A report from al-Waer neighbourhood committee which oversaw the evacuation.
[47] Annabella Böttcher, 'Large-Scale Forced Population Transfers in Syria: Details of the Recent 'Four Towns Agreement'', (2017).

2015 several civil society-driven initiatives were launched calling for a ceasefire and the lifting of the siege.[48] These resulted in Syrian-led local agreements that provided the towns with long stretches of calm and the delivery of aid, interrupted by shorter periods of violence. A mediator of one of the agreements explained that the failure of these agreements to firmly take root was due to the lack on both sides of a genuine will for peace. Moreover, the Gulf-funded opposition armed groups feared losing their funds should they commit to a durable ceasefire.[49]

The opposition armed groups established coalitions with counterparts in Idleb, including with SIF which joined an Idleb-based coalition called the Fateh Army supported by Turkey and the Gulf. The extremist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was a key member of the Fateh Army. With Hezbollah forces outside the towns, regional rivalry gradually replaced what started as a Syrian conflict.

In July 2015, as a means to pressure Hezbollah to end its assaults on Zabadani and Madaya, the Fateh Army attacked the towns Kefraya and Fouah and tightened the siege around them, leading only to further escalation.[50] With sponsorship from Iran and Turkey, negotiations began between Ahrar al-Sham, Hezbollah and the Syrian authorities, leading to two ceasefires in August 2015.[51] The first ceasefire was short-lived because, according to Ahrar al-Sham, 'the Iranian delegation with which we were negotiating, was trying to effectively exchange one area for another', referring to the idea of a population swap between the people of Kefraya and Fouah and those of Zabadani and Madaya.[52] The news about a potential population swap sparked outrage. Representatives of civil society and local independent armed groups issued a statement lambasting the idea, condemning 'any suspicious regional or international agreement to share their hegemony over the wounded Syria'.[53] While the idea was rejected, the fate of the four towns remained tied together in all subsequent agreements, and every agreement regarding Zabadani and Madaya included mirrored articles for Kefraya and Fouah. This was especially true for humanitarian aid in what Böttcher called an 'instrumentalization of confessional sieges for the weaponization of humanitarian aid'.[54]

By the end of August, the truce fell apart as a result of disagreements between the Syrian government and Hezbollah.[55] A month later, the women of Zabadani and Madaya launched a plea to end the siege which was signed by 470 women from inside the towns requesting a negotiated solution, safe evacuation for the wounded, delivery of aid and an end to arbitrary arrest.[56]

One month later, a new six-month agreement was brokered by Iran and Turkey that once again linked the four towns.[57] The Idleb-based Saudi cleric, Al-Muhaiseni, was a leading figure in these talks representing HTS. He was sitting opposite the Iranian

[48]See for example the initiative at LASA Four towns, page 1.
[49]Interview with a Syrian mediator from Zabadani, 23 February 2021.
[50]SOHR archive, 22-7-2015. https://www.syriahr.com/en/26250/
[51]SOHR archive, 27-8-2015. https://www.syriahr.com/en/30235/
[52]Ibid
[53]LASA Four towns, page 2.
[54]Annabella Böttcher, 'Large-Scale Forced Population Transfers in Syria: Details of the Recent 'Four Towns Agreement'', (2017).
[55]SOHR archive, 28-8-2015 https://www.syriahr.com/en/30378/ and 29-8-2015 https://bit.ly/2SRTMY0
[56]'Women-led initiative to end the siege on Zabadani' Arabi21, 16-9-2015, https://bit.ly/3pch9l6
[57]SOHR archive, 29 September 2015, https://bit.ly/3pmMg3O

representative, discussing in detail the destiny of four Syrian towns. In addition to a ceasefire, the agreement included allowing some opposition fighters with their families to leave Zabadani and Madaya safely to Idleb in return for allowing a number of people to leave Kefraya and Foua.[58] At the end of 2015, several appeals were made to the Russians to interfere and help reach a solution for Zabadani and Madaya that de-linked the four towns. At this time, news broke out about a new Russian initiative that envisaged Hezbollah moving away from the area and de-linking the towns.[59] However, no such initiative materialised. A mediator from Zabadani who had attended meetings with the Russians told me:

> Initially the officials at the Russian reconciliation centre promised us to interfere to reach a fair solution for Zabadani and Madaya, but in the next meeting they said that for the time being they cannot do anything, and that the area is under strong Hezbollah control. Later I learned that they didn't want to interfere because they were still new on the ground in Syria and also because any agreement would have required the involvement of Turkey. Back then their relations with Turkey had deteriorated because of the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey.[60]

Iran, Turkey and Hezbollah continued to control the talks around the four towns throughout 2016 despite local resistance. In December 2016 civic leaders in Madaya and Zabadani put forward a civic solution based on local actors' corporation from all sides, ruling out displacing civilians and naming only the UN as an external actor to sponsor the potential agreement and oversee its implementation together with the locals.[61] The initiative did not see the lights as during the same month another agreement was being negotiated in Ankara. It was an evacuation agreement for Aleppo but articles were added to the agreement stipulating the evacuation of humanitarian cases in Kefraya and Foua in return for allowing a similar evacuation in Zabadani and Madaya.[62] This did not end conflict in the towns and negotiations continued into 2017, but with a new complexity. The talks had now moved to Doha, with Qatar now involved to demand the release of the Qatari princes kidnapped while on a hunting trip in Iraq by an Iranian-backed militia.[63] It was later revealed that hundreds of millions of dollars were paid by Qataris to various Iranian, Iraqi, Lebanese militias through this deal.[64] They reached a final deal in March 2017, which included the exchange of the Qataris for Lebanese fighters held by HTS; the evacuation of all opposition fighters from Madaya and Zabadani wanting to leave and offered settlement for those wishing to remain and lay down their arms; and a complete evacuation of the entire population of Kefraya and Foua.[65] The leaked agreement, which also included the opposition-controlled southern suburbs of Damascus was widely rejected by civil society.[66] This led to large demonstration in the

[58]A. Al-Kurdi. 'Al Zabadani Agreement'. *Al Arabi al Jadid*, 19 September 2015 https://bit.ly/3fKyO6p.
[59]M. Rayyan. 'Russia Snatches the Zabadani File from Iran'. 25 November 2015 https://bit.ly/3fOa9y5.
[60]Interview with a civil society activist who attended the meetings with the Russians. 12 February 2021.
[61]LASA Four towns, page 3.
[62]SOHR archive, 18 December 2016, https://www.syriahr.com/en/57217/
[63]Annabella Böttcher, 'Large-Scale Forced Population Transfers in Syria: Details of the Recent 'Four Towns Agreement'', (2017).
[64]LASA Four towns, pages 6–7, also seeJoby Warrick. 'Hacked Messages Show Qatar Appearing to Pay Hundreds of Millions to Free Hostages'. *Washington Post* 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hacked-messages-show-qatar-appearing-to-pay-hundreds-of-millions-to-free-hostages/2018/04/27/46759ce2-3f41-11e8-974f-aacd97698cef_story.html.
[65]Annabella Böttcher, 'Large-Scale Forced Population Transfers in Syria: Details of the Recent 'Four Towns Agreement'', (2017).
[66]LASA Four towns, pages 4–5.

southern suburbs with protesters carrying slogans that read 'Iran, Hezbollah and HTS have no mandate over our areas'.[67] Eventually the south of Damascus was excluded from the agreement, but the rest of the articles were implemented over the course of a few months, leading to the complete evacuation of both civilians and militias from Kefraya and Foua. The towns were subsequently taken over by HTS and the armed-opposition.[68] After outright conflict ended in Zabadani and Madaya, many people who had fled returned.[69]

Discussion and conclusion

The empirical evidence in this article sheds light on the astounding complexity of local agreements in the context of a proxy war. Local-to-local diplomacy gets intertwined with national-level diplomacy, which itself gets entangled in the diplomacy between the external states. In the middle of this diplomatic web, the local agenda gets lost.

The results support the argument that the influencing and shaping of local agreements by external actors is an important element in third-party intervention in protracted conflicts. The results demonstrate how the various forms of support sponsors provide to their proxies, including financial, military and logistical, becomes transformed during these processes into a source of 'leverage' and negotiation and decision-making power by the sponsors. At times, the sponsor even replaces its proxies in the talks. In the two case studies, Iran became a main decision-maker in the negotiations of local agreements, building on its financial support to the NDF, the Shia militias and Hezbollah and its ability to mobilise them along sectarian lines. Russia became the main decision-maker of al-Waer agreements given its military support to the Syrian government. Turkey was able to play a role in several agreements because of its logistical support to the opposition.

In this new form of third-party intervention, the leverage a sponsor has over their proxies can also be used to sabotage negotiations if they do not head in the desired direction. This can be seen in the systematic attempts of the Iranian-supported militias in Homs to spoil agreements reached between Syrian actors. The leverage Russians had over the Syrian government was used to dictate military decisions to target opposition-controlled areas and pressure them to return to the table. By controlling violence and resources and by manipulating identity politics, the sponsors could shape the process and final agreements forged. Their leverage is not used as incentive to the parties, as in traditional mediation, but rather used to determine the outcome they desire.

In all the externally influenced agreements in the two case studies, there were also locally driven processes of negotiations driven mainly by civil society. But the external role derailed them and instead, steered the agenda towards the interests of the external sponsors and diminished the agency of local groups. Progress in locally initiated talks became hostage to geopolitical alignments. In Homs, Zabadani and Madaya, for example, the terms of the local negotiation initiatives were designed to address local needs and grievances, such as the release of arbitrarily arrested Syrians and the re-integration of rebels while ruling out or

[67]'Demonstrations in Southern Damascus, Rejecting the "Five Cities" Agreement'. *Enab Baladi* 12 April 2017 https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/142812.
[68]Matoon. 'What Happened in Kefraya and Foua after Evacuation '. *Ayn Al-Madina*, 26 August 2018.
[69]Interview with Zabadani based civil society activist, 12 February 2021.

minimising displacement and population transfers. In the example of the externally influenced agreements of the old city of Homs and the towns of Kerfaya and Foua, a full evacuation including all civilians took place and led to a significant demographic change.

Local mediators acknowledged the external role but envisaged it as complimentary to their plans. When external actors deepened their control over the talks, the agreements' terms reflected external interests and goals. The release of detainees was replaced with the exchange of hostages, including their own nationals and favoured displacement of civilians and rebels.

In the resulting externally influenced agreements, the locals lost a considerable amount of their agency and become mainly implementers. Nevertheless, resistance against the external role could be observed at all levels and at times was met with relative success. One example was the large demonstrations against Iran, Hezbollah and HTS in the southern suburb of Damascus. These resulted in excluding the area from the agreement. Another example were the various statements rejecting the agreements by various actors in Homs, Zabadani and Madaya and their attempts to reach out to the UN which resulted in delivery of aid and at times the presence of UN officials in the meetings. Yet another example was the way that negotiation committee of al-Waer managed to change the initial Russian template agreement to one that better suited the area and included more of their asks.

What is also clear is that the locals understood very well the role played by external regional actors and the associated risks. The leading mediator of Homs started his initiative with a visit to the sponsoring states and also demanded UN endorsement for the final agreement. The opposition committee in Homs also sent a letter sent to the UN envoy warning about the potential of regional powers to sabotage their agreements. In Zabadani, the opposition reached out to Russians hoping that they could offset the Iranian role.

The results also suggest that external actors most able to shape local agreements had physical presence on the ground. For example, the Russians began playing a leading role in local agreements only after they intervened militarily in Syria at the end of 2015. Iran, which had an earlier military presence on the ground, played a direct role in talks from 2012. The Gulf sponsors, despite heavy financial sponsorship of opposition armed groups, did not have a direct presence on the ground and had less say in the agreements and were mainly represented by their proxies.

Whether this kind of third-party intervention in local agreements exacerbated the conflict or brought it to an end is not straightforward. What is evident from the Syrian examples, however, was a complex of interventions between unilateral actors aiming at exacerbating the wars and those aiming at stabilisation. The Syrian case was an arena for several cases where the same countries that intervened in support of one actor or another sat together to agree a ceasefire and solutions for a particular locality or directed their proxies to do so. One example was the Ankara process that involved several countries, including Russia. It led to the Aleppo agreement and included the four towns' agreement. In this coming together of unilateral actors, the main multilateral actor, the UN, was sitting on the margins, unable and sometimes unwilling to be the leading force in such talks which broke many international norms for negotiation and humanitarian conduct. At the same time, the UN did not want to be excluded from the process and hoped to link it to the more liberal institutions-focused Geneva process. Local actors persistently called for the UN to play a role in the local agreement in order to offset the unilateral roles and to be the neutral external actor who could monitor ceasefires and provide protection for civilians. But the UN mandate to mediate a peace agreement for Syria was confined to its role in Geneva. It had no official mandate to play

such a role at local levels. It also had no mandate to deploy monitors on the ground except for a short period in 2012 in Aleppo but even that was never implemented. In most cases, the UN ended up as the implementing partner of deals heavily dominated by unilateral intervening states.

In this hybrid intervention arena, external states played overlapping and contradictory roles in local agreements. The very same states that were party to the conflict played the role of mediator, guarantor and also policed the implementation of the agreement and offers protection. The Iranians in Homs offered to play the role of mediator and guarantor. The Russians mediated the al-Waer agreement, played a guarantor role and oversaw the implementation including the deportation to the north.

Those external actors who favoured stabilisation rather than continued violence, also attempted to play a peacekeeping and monitoring role. Some examples are the Turkish observation posts in northwest Syria, the Russian ceasefire monitoring centre in Hmeimim, and the Russian military police, which deployed in several areas in the wake of the agreements.

Evaluating the impact of third-party interventions in local agreements, even where these interventions favoured stabilisation is also difficult in the short term. While calm was restored in Homs, Zabadani and Madaya, the fighters who were deported from these areas have joined the cycle of violence in the parts of Syria.

The main conclusion is that this new type of hybrid external intervention may, in some circumstances, contribute to an unjust and uncertain stabilisation process, while in other circumstances, it can undermine local peace efforts. The clear implication is the need for a greater role for multilateral actors and, in particular, the need to include local-level peace agreements in UN mandates.

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Notes on contributor

Dr Rim Turkmani is Senior Policy Fellow at Conflict Research Programme, LSE IDEAS.