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TO END A WAR: EUROPE'S ROLE IN BRINGING PEACE TO SYRIA

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SUMMARY

- The US and Russia are renewing efforts to advance zonal de-escalation in Syria. This approach offers the most viable way to decrease violence, promote some relief for the Syrian population, and address wider European interests. But they are neglecting the need for a political framework.
- European members of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) should push for an approach that focuses on national politics hand in hand with de-escalation efforts, moving away from an approach that only phases the national angle in after a ceasefire takes hold. Even if ceasefire attempts proceed piecemeal they will only be durable if negotiators tie them to a national political track.
- Assad remains intent on regaining control of all of Syria, but capacity constraints will limit his progress. Europeans should support a devolution approach that incentivises a softer reintegration of non-regime controlled areas. This will provide a degree of local autonomy to remaining opposition holdouts.
- France's recent decision to support de-escalation suggests there may be an opening for Europeans to align such efforts with national politics. But the French need to focus on forging a coherent European coalition able to flex diplomatic muscle.

After six years of brutal conflict, Syria's civil war has entered a new phase. With Bashar al-Assad ascendant across core parts of the country and foreign backers propping up peripheral, non-regime zones, a new reality based on internationally backed spheres of influence is emerging. Current de-escalation efforts are largely based on this premise.

Europeans now face a critical choice. They can reject this proposed trajectory on the basis that it does not deliver a political transition and risks entrenching fragmentation; or they can step up and support a process of de-escalation sustained by an active political track. This paper argues that Europeans should choose the latter option. Assad's continued rule offends the European sense of justice, but Europeans unfortunately have no other choice if they want to end the war and bring some peace to Syria. This track now offers the most viable means of providing desperately needed humanitarian and stabilising relief to the Syrian population, as well as addressing the conditions feeding refugees flows and extremism.

This paper argues that current de-escalation efforts are doomed to fail because they lack a viable national political arrangement linked to the ceasefire arrangements. In contrast to the sequencing of current negotiations, this paper argues that the national politics need to come front and centre in de-escalation efforts and cannot be delayed until after the implementation of sustainable ceasefires. Local ceasefires will only be durable if directly tied to a national political vision that the different warring parties, and the regime in particular, buy in to. Without a clear sense of a wider strategic political umbrella, every ceasefire remains, at best, fragile, and, at worst, a prelude to an entirely new phase of civil war.

It is now clear that a viable political process cannot be about a transition away from Assad, which has consistently been the point at which previous initiatives have unravelled. The political vision must now incorporate the reality on the ground, which is that the regime will remain the dominant actor for the foreseeable future. Within this context this paper proposes advancing an immediate national devolution track weighted in the regime's favour, given its unassailable military ascendancy, as the necessary means of locking in sustainable localised agreements. While ceasefires will not hold everywhere, those that do emerge will have a better chance of enduring if tied to this wider political vision.

The regime may feel confident now, with ongoing ambitions of complete conquest. But it faces constraints that mean it may have to accept a lesser victory. The devolution model proposed here attempts to meet enough of the regime's core ambitions in order to shift Assad's calculus towards the acceptance of a softer re-integration of ongoing areas of opposition or non-regime control back under central influence. The path outlined in this paper recognises the sovereignty of the central government over the entire country, and also offers a way to reduce foreign influence over the respective zones. This is conditioned on the consolidation of sustainable local autonomy, particularly within the security sphere, as well as significant progress on humanitarian aid and access to detainees. This may now be the necessary price to sustainably lock in ceasefires and bring wider relief to the Syrian people now that the regime change agenda is dead. In assessing the dilemma of this approach, Europeans should acknowledge that the alternative option – a continued Russian- and Iranian-backed military advance by Assad's forces, which no one is prepared to actively halt – will cause yet more violence, death, and dislocation. Moreover, this solution would still seek to ultimately empower a necessary intra-Syrian dialogue towards a final, codified settlement, without which there will never be true long-term stability.

This paper suggests avenues for Europeans to forge an effective diplomatic track under French leadership. Emmanuel Macron's renewed focus on Syria and support for de-escalation efforts, and the inability of other member states to take a lead on this issue, make France the natural leader of this initiative.

The Syrian civil war is a geopolitical and humanitarian tragedy. It needs to end. Europe cannot dictate outcomes in Syria but it does have the power to make an important difference. The path outlined here is difficult and uncertain. But without a political track, the current ceasefires will surely collapse into renewed violence.

Consolidation and fragmentation

Syria is now divided into regime-controlled territory, which includes most of the populated west, and the country's outer peripheries, which are largely under a patchwork of foreign influences. Transition away from the regime is not possible – Assad is not going to negotiate his own removal at United Nations talks. There is also no realistic prospect of ousting him by force or sufficiently shifting the balance of power to force a negotiated transition. Donald Trump's decision in June 2017 to cease the covert arming by the United States of anti-Assad rebels formally ended this dream.¹ While armed rebels fight on against the regime in isolated pockets, they have no hope of victory. In Idlib, the last opposition stronghold, the dominant position of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the jihadist coalition led by the former al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front, means that such a victory is not even desirable.²

But the regime similarly has no prospect of regaining absolute control of the entire country. Turkish-backed forces control more than 2,000 square kilometres in the north.³ Syrian Kurdish-held areas in the north-east are under direct US protection, while a second Kurdish canton north of Aleppo, Afrin, enjoys Russian backing.⁴ In the south-west, Jordan and its international partners support the opposition's hold over parts of Daraa, Suwayda, and Quneitra provinces. Even if regime change is no longer the priority in these areas, the positioning of external actors, and the regime's own significant capacity constraints, particularly its limited manpower, restrict its ability to retake and hold new ground.⁵

The regime's position in the centre of the country is secure, but it continues to face intractable insurgent and terrorist threats. In December 2016, for example, the regime lost the city of Palmyra to ISIS for a second time while regime forces concentrated on taking eastern Aleppo. In March 2017, the rebels' successful incursion into parts of Damascus and Hama showed they could still challenge the regime in its heartland. Assad eventually took back the lost ground, but the incidents demonstrate his continuing vulnerability.

Meanwhile, competition for ISIS territory is heating up. Turkey's fears about the creation of a Kurdish zone of control running across the Turkish-Syrian border underpin its opposition to the anti-ISIS coalition's advance on Raqqa. Ankara also fears that the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) will

¹ See: Sam Heller, "America Had Already Lost Its Covert War in Syria—Now It's Official", the Century Foundation, 21 July 2017, available at <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/america-already-lost-covert-war-syria-now-official/>.

² Author's interviews with a European Union member state ministry of foreign affairs officials, July-August 2017. For an overview of the HTS takeover in Idlib and its likely international implications, see: Aron Lund, "Black flags over Idlib: The jihadi power grab in northwestern Syria", IRIN, 9 August 2017, available at <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/08/09/black-flags-over-idlib-jihadi-power-grab-northwestern-syria>.

³ "Turkey ends 'Euphrates Shield' operation in Syria", Al Jazeera, 30 March 2017, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/turkey-ends-euphrates-shield-operation-syria-170329211428970.html>.

⁴ Erika Solomon, "Russia strengthens presence in Kurdish-held Syria", Financial Times, 21 March 2017, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/d8352aca-0e0b-11e7-a88c-50ba212dce4d>.

⁵ Tobias Schneider, "Debt-Ridden and Broke: The Syrian Regime's Colossal Reconstruction Challenge", Middle East Institute, 18 July 2017, available at <https://www.mei.edu/content/article/debt-ridden-and-broke-syrian-regime-s-colossal-reconstruction-challenge>.

empower Turkey's own Kurdish insurgency. The PYD, whose forces are spearheading the advance of the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) against ISIS, is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that is fighting Turkish forces in Turkey.⁶ These links could provoke a deeper Turkish intervention aimed at blocking PYD gains.⁷ European governments also fear that Kurdish attempts to impose governance structures on areas captured from ISIS will provoke conflict with local Arabs.⁸ These frictions risk undermining the anti-ISIS advance and post-conquest stabilisation efforts.

In Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor province, pro-regime forces are rushing to gain ground ahead of anti-ISIS, coalition-supported fighters. Assad needs control of the east for important economic reasons but also to prevent a continuous opposition zone linking SDF forces in the north with opposition fighters based in southern Syria.⁹ For the regime, this would represent a debilitating carve-up of the country and a long-term strategic threat. Assad's key external backer, Iran, may also want to preserve a direct land route through Iraq to Lebanon, though its more immediate objective appears to be ensuring that an adversarial force is unable to maintain a long-term presence in this area. While regime forces now hold the upper hand given recent territorial gains, their advance eastwards provoked a series of US attacks on Iranian-backed militiamen in June close to the US-backed al-Tanf garrison on the Syrian-Iraqi border, as well as the US downing of a Syrian fighter jet in the southern Raqqa countryside in June 2017.¹⁰ A wider escalation, including direct US-Iranian and US-Russian clashes, remains a distinct possibility.

A fragile opportunity

This complex mix of interests requires a process to urgently calm tensions to prevent the war further drawing in Turkey, Iran, the US, and Russia. But it also presents an opportunity to stabilise the evolving map of Syria: emerging zones of control and the limits of regime control offer a template for a de-escalation process. The reality is that authority in Syria is already on a trajectory of devolution – a situation which neither the regime nor opposition can hope to reverse given the role of external actors in propping up their respective clients. Outside actors should now use this template for constructive purposes by supporting a process of effective decentralisation; if not it risks playing out in a chaotic manner that feeds ongoing conflict.

6 "Weapons supplied to YPG/PYD by US obtained by the PKK, National Security Council says", Daily Sabah, 17 July 2017, available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/07/17/weapons-supplied-to-ypgpyd-by-us-obtained-by-the-pkk-national-security-council-says>.

7 Bethan McKernan, "Clashes between Kurdish and Turkish forces in Syria threaten to derail fight against Isis", the Independent, 28 April 2017, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdish-fighters-turkish-army-syria-isis-battle-ypg-ypj-sdf-sinjar-raqqa-rojava-islamic-state-daesh-a7707471.html>.

8 Author's interviews with European officials, 2017. See also: Andrew Tabler, "Eyeing Raqqa", WINEP, March 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/eyeing-raqqa-a-tale-of-four-tribes>.

9 Fabrice Balanche, "Assad Needs 'Useless Syria' Too", WINEP, 4 January 2017, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/assad-needs-useless-syria-too>.

10 Mohammad Ersan, "Syrian rebel commander: 150 US troops at al-Tanf base", Al-Monitor, 1 June 2017, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/06/syria-desert-tanf-us-backed-rebel-group.html>.

This approach may also offer the possibility of calming tensions in post-ISIS areas. Turkey may ultimately see a controlled – and contained – devolution of power as the best means of limiting Kurdish ambitions. In the east, an initial zonal understanding that moves towards a devolution approach could form the basis of an agreement that delineates lines of control and prevents confrontation between the US and Iran or Russia.

Zones are already a central component of the Russian approach to the conflict, driving the de-escalation initiative forged in Astana with Turkey and Iran. A zonal approach also forms the basis of overlapping – but separate – negotiations between Russia, the US, and Jordan over south-west Syria. The Astana initiative, which created four zones of de-escalation across the centre, north, and south of the country, emerged on the back of wider Russian signalling about the possibility of a zonal, decentralised approach. Moscow has long been coordinating with Turkey and Jordan over their backing for opposition-controlled northern and southern zones, providing a stamp of Russian approval to their respective spheres of influence.¹¹ It has also attempted to broker a regime-Kurdish alignment, including by advancing a draft Syrian constitution that is based on decentralisation.¹²

This effort has picked up steam following negotiations with the US over southern Syria. Donald Trump has spoken of the need for "safe zones", which correspond to Russia's de-escalation zones.¹³ Talks have expanded to also include a division of influence, via the establishment of a de-confliction line, in eastern Syria.¹⁴

But the current push towards de-escalation according to agreed zones of control faces serious obstacles. Levels of violence have certainly decreased, but significant fighting continues. Importantly, the regime has, with Iranian backing, used the ceasefire agreements to advance its wider strategic objectives, periodically bombing the different zones, redeploying troops eastwards, and continuing to block humanitarian aid.¹⁵ In short, there is little to suggest that the warring parties, and especially the regime, intend to hold to the agreement once its tactical value expires. In the end, purely localised, standalone agreements serve to incentivise ongoing operations elsewhere and, worse, their own eventual collapse.

11 See: "Turkey coordinating troop movements in Syria with Russia", Associated Press, 8 February 2017, available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/ap-turkey-coordinating-troop-movements-in-syria-with-russia-2017-2?IR=T>; and "Russia, Jordan agree on military coordination on Syria", Reuters, 23 October 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-jordan-idUSKCN0SH1ER20151023>.

12 See: "Russia-drafted new constitution for Syria promises Kurds greater autonomy", The New Arab, 26 January 2017, available at <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/1/26/russia-drafted-new-constitution-for-syria-promises-kurds-greater-autonomy>.

13 Julie Edwards Ainsley and Matt Spetalnick, "Trump says he will order 'safe zones' for Syria", Reuters, 25 January 2017, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-syria-safezones-idUSKBN159208>.

14 Ayham al-Mohammad, "US-backed fighters seek to oust IS from Syria's Deir Ezzor", AFP, 25 August 2017, available at <https://www.yahoo.com/news/us-backed-fighters-seek-oust-syrias-deir-ezzor-151502710.html>.

15 See: Tom Perry and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Assad's march east compounds West's Syria dilemma", Reuters, 17 August 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-analysis-idUSKCN1AX0H1>; Riham Alkousaa, "Britain presses Syria, Russia to allow aid access to besieged areas", Reuters, 27 July 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-un-idUSKBN1AC315>; "Syrian army bombs 'safe zones' killing civilians", Al Jazeera, 10 August 2017, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/syrian-army-bombs-safe-zones-killing-civilians-170810161935842.html>.

Continued negotiations – driven in part by Moscow's desire to reach an agreement that allows it to cement Russian-backed regime gains – hold out the possibility of progress.¹⁶ But if this is to materialise, the negotiations urgently need a new political dynamic added to the mix.

Most significantly, there needs to be an immediate national framework able to bind the ceasefires into a more sustainable process. Without wider political meaning, the current process will almost certainly unravel, as was the case with previous attempts. Typically, transforming local ceasefires into an end to the broader war requires externally backed enforcement mechanisms. But such efforts remain highly improbable in Syria and, in their absence, only a national political arrangement that gains the support of a sufficient number of the warring parties on the ground – and, most importantly of all, the ascendant regime – can hope to make the ceasefires sustainable. While ceasefires will be grounded in local politics, they need to plug into a national mainframe which points to a political end-game if the regime is not to see them as temporary agreements which it can exploit to consolidate wider control.

For the moment, US and Russian de-escalation efforts are missing this critical element. While Moscow at one point attempted to inject a conversation on national politics into the Astana process this was rejected by the opposition and its international backers.¹⁷ As a result the Astana process and Russian-US negotiations now focus on trying to conclude advanced localised agreements; but these are divorced from the wider political track. According to Brett McGurk, the US special presidential envoy for the global coalition to counter ISIS, de-escalation is intended to quieten the situation so as to set the “conditions for an ultimate political solution.”¹⁸ McGurk also makes clear that the US views the ceasefire as a standalone agreement rather than one element of a broader national package.¹⁹

The failure of six years of negotiations understandably cautions against attempts to put politics upfront, but the same experience of failed ceasefire attempts – and the clear fragility of current efforts – demonstrates that the politics cannot be side-lined. In short, there will be no enduring ceasefires without an accompanying political track. Squaring the circle requires a reassessment of what is politically possible, a resizing of ambitions.

De-escalation through a national vision of devolution

A viable national political approach now requires the domestic opposition and outside actors to work around Assad's continuation in office. But, based on the facts on the ground, such an approach can still seek to temper his coercive power by cementing a degree of local autonomy in areas the regime does not fully control. This is far less than many still aspire to but may represent the only means of ensuring some form of softer landing for remaining opposition holdouts, to say nothing of meeting the desperate ongoing needs of the wider Syrian population. Framed correctly, this devolutionary track could prove sufficiently enticing to lock the support of the different warring parties in behind sustained de-escalation. It rests on a core deal: the Assad-led regime secures local and international affirmation of the sovereignty of the central government over all of Syria's territory in exchange for agreements on the localised devolution of power, including control over security arrangements, in remaining opposition zones of control.

For the regime, this track will offer a clear shift by the domestic opposition and international community away from regime change. It will concede the sovereignty of the Assad-led central government over the entire country – something it has long sought. Measures such as the symbolically and materially important step of allowing the Syrian government to regain control over border posts would seek to secure the regime's adherence to this framework. This process would also play off key regime capacity constraints, not just military but also economic: namely, the immense challenge of stabilisation and reconstruction, the cost of which is estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars.²⁰ Despite its recent bluster rejecting any Western role in the post-war environment, the regime will not be able to secure necessary resources and open economic gateways without a degree of Western sign-off (if not engagement). The impact of Western sanctions on the financial sector is one example of a debilitating measure that will severely cripple the economy in the long term without redress.

To ensure Assad's compliance, this initiative would effectively concede some of the regime's core political demands, domestically and internationally. Injecting a national devolution logic tilted in the regime's favour would nonetheless also aim to establish the contours of a sustainable political relationship between the centre and the peripheries. This would provide an opportunity for the ceasefire to become permanent. In essence, Assad would achieve his core ambitions through a softer reintegration of the state, offsetting the need for costly ongoing coercive operations to draw the entire state back under his control. This track would also play off the interests of the regime's core backers, Russia and Iran, which ultimately shoulder the burden of ongoing regime advances, given the regime's

¹⁶ ECFR interviews with analysts and government advisors, Moscow, July 2017.

¹⁷ Henry Meyer, “Syria Opposition Rejects Russian Draft of New Constitution”, Bloomberg, 25 January 2017, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-01-25/syria-opposition-rejects-russian-draft-of-new-constitution>.

¹⁸ Brett McGurk, “Update: Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS”, US State Department, 4 August 2017, available at <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/08/273198.htm>. (Hereafter, Brett McGurk, “Update: Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS”).

¹⁹ Brett McGurk, “Update: Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS”.

²⁰ Jeanne Gobat and Kristina Kostial, “Syria's Conflict Economy”, International Monetary Fund, June 2016, available at <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2016/wp16123.pdf>.

severe manpower and resource constraints. As part of this agreement foreign states could agree to incrementally withdraw from their respective spheres of influence – a key regime ambition – if political benchmarks are met and satisfactorily institutionalised in the long term.

As part of this proposed track, the rebels would gain a clear formal roadmap which would allow them to survive and which would give them a degree of local autonomy. After more than six years of conflict, this is now the best they can realistically hope to attain. This autonomy would first and foremost mean local security control, as is now being negotiated in the emerging standalone agreements. This will include taking the lead in ongoing counterterrorism efforts against locally embedded extremist groups. But more broadly, devolution could empower a local council to run local services such as policing, though some central state institutions and governance functions would also return into the respective areas.

This approach has better prospects of success where rebels are more fatigued, less radical, and more dependent on external sponsors willing to push them towards de-escalation. It is an outcome that Turkey and Jordan increasingly support given their primary interest in stabilising border regions. Ankara's level of backing is likely to be directly tied to whether it will help contain Syrian Kurdish territorial ambitions. Other external backers in the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, are consumed by problems closer to home, be they internal power struggles, the war in Yemen, or the crisis over Qatar. They have also largely given up on supporting regime change and are now pressing the opposition to recognise the reality that Assad will survive.²¹

However, an agreement that does not secure Assad's eventual removal will clearly provoke some backlash on the ground. The most fervently anti-Assad and radical forces, particularly those in Idlib province, will not accept it. Elsewhere it may feed some increased mobilisation behind more radical groups, though possibly less than commonly assumed given the degree of fatigue, rebel divisions, and the allure of a deal that would deliver local gains²². Ultimately this track could contribute to the key objective of defeating ISIS.

Any agreements that help restore a semblance of stability and local governance would address the vacuum and conflict conditions that ISIS has so ably exploited. Radicalisation is most likely to endure if Assad allows regime-affiliated militias and foreign fighters backed by Iran and Hezbollah to emerge as the dominant actors on the ground. But a devolved approach will necessarily be based on the regime's acceptance of locally controlled security arrangements. This would prevent militias and foreign forces from advancing into

21 Philip Issa, "Syria opposition told to come to terms with Assad's survival", AP, 24 August 2017 available at <https://apnews.com/60c6e5d0814442528efefb257c02e34b>.

22 On the potentially radicalising impact of a deal that does not see Assad removed see, for instance: Charles Lister, who says, "the principal benefactor of Assad's survival is not Assad, nor Russia, Iran, Hezbollah or even ISIS—it is Al-Qaeda." Charles Lister, "Al Qaeda Reaps Rewards of U.S. Policy Failures on Syria", the Daily Beast, 6 July 2017, available at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/al-qaeda-reaps-rewards-of-us-policy-failures-on-syria>.

these zones, much as the US-Russian agreement in south-western Syria is trying to do by restricting the further advance by Iranian-backed militias into the de-escalation zone.²³

Geographically, the proposed devolutionary approach would initially correspond with current conflict lines and be centred on the populous regime-controlled western belt of the country, as well across the east to Deir Ezzor and the Iraqi border. Despite some apparent US ambitions to prevent the regime and its Iranian backers from securing a foothold in the east, the reality is that regime forces are best placed out of all the actors on the ground to move towards Deir Ezzor. Any effort to prevent this would spoil the chance for a wider de-escalatory push: a Western-backed zone in the east, situated between hostile Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq, would intensify the geopolitical struggle over Syria and almost certainly fail. Western actors should instead focus on securing an agreement that SDF forces control areas north of the Euphrates river up to Deir Ezzor and regime forces assert direct control over areas south of the river.

The regime would exert full control in all of these areas, but it would have to accept a series of accompanying zones of devolved control. This would include: a south-western zone under initial US-Jordanian patronage; a Turkish-supported zone in the area marked out by Ankara's Euphrates Shield military incursion; and a US-supported Kurdish and Arab zone in the north-east. Importantly, this last zone points to the necessity of intra-zonal dimensions to any agreements. In the north-east, the Kurds will need to be pressed by outside backers to accept meaningful local control in Arab-majority areas, including Raqqqa.

The agreements would also prevent any unification of the two Kurdish cantons. Likewise, while larger remaining opposition pockets within core regime areas will have to accept regime authority, this should also be paired with a degree of local autonomy and an end to evacuation of rebel fighters to Idlib, as has previously been the case. The July 2017 agreement reached over East Ghouta demonstrates that this may be possible.²⁴ The regime's desire to ensure that non-HTS factions in Idlib remain weak and do not secure renewed international backing could work to facilitate agreements whereby fighters from groups such as Jaish al-Islam in East Ghouta are allowed to remain in place as part of local agreements rather than being transferred to Idlib.

The fate of Idlib province is the main question mark in this approach. The dominant presence of HTS there rules out any possibility of including Idlib in an internationally supported devolution agreement. Not only will HTS fighters refuse to abide by any agreement, but international actors and the regime will not include them. Ultimately, ridding Idlib of al-Qaeda influence will require a military campaign in the province, likely led by the regime or Turkey.

23 See Ibrahim Hamidi, "نمؤزلا تدعاق لئلفغفتو... «نمؤزلا تدعاق لئلفغفتو» نم ناري! جريخت ايسور", *Al Sharq al Awsat*, 22 June 2017, available at <http://bit.ly/2ssSVNU>.

24 For details of the East Ghouta Agreement see: Ibrahim Hamidi, "نمؤزلا تدعاق لئلفغفتو... «نمؤزلا تدعاق لئلفغفتو» نم ناري! جريخت ايسور", *Al Sharq al Awsat*, 24 July 2017, available at <http://bit.ly/2uBUNUa>.

But even in Idlib, a devolved approach still offers the best hope for stabilisation in any eventual post-HTS stage. A prolonged Turkish military presence is unlikely and the regime lacks the capacity to conquer a province that is now home to the most anti-Assad core of the opposition. Most of the regime's key territorial gains have depended on negotiated evacuations rather than the military defeat of opposition forces – an outcome that is not possible in Idlib given that Turkey has closed the border. While Assad can place the province under prolonged military assault, he will struggle to assert real dominance and will almost certainly have to concede a degree of local devolution in the end.

This national approach would aim to provide the political mainframe to sustainably maintain a series of different ceasefires. While de-escalation will not quickly fall into place across all of Syria, a national logic will be key to ensuring that ceasefires become durable. Ultimately this would seek to open the space for intra-Syrian negotiations on a final settlement and constitutional arrangements. Syrian negotiators will have to determine the extent of devolved governance, the role of the president, property rights, and, most fundamentally, the security sector. There are clearly huge obstacles to the emergence of meaningful intra-Syrian talks when Assad's regime is dominant. Still, they are more likely to deliver gains – even if modest -- than the ongoing attempts by the regime to wrest back total control through brute force.

Importantly, this approach will simultaneously provide an opening to ameliorate the desperate situation of civilians, which must now be the guiding star of international efforts towards de-escalation. This will include taming levels of violence, increasing humanitarian relief, and allowing for the return of some governance functions to devastated areas. It will also be premised on the idea of preserving Syria's territorial integrity, as the Syrian people demand.²⁵ All international parties share an interest in this goal, as any move towards fragmentation could provoke a wider regional unravelling. An orderly devolution of power based on a national political approach that unifies the different zones under one umbrella will help cement Syria's national integrity. Syria's unity ultimately depends on some return of the institutional state – which does not have to include the regime's security apparatus – to the entirety of the country. By contrast, an approach devoid of any national organising principle and shared political commitment, as appears to characterise current Russian-US efforts, risks hardening division lines, permanently entrenching foreign influence, and feeding the forces of fragmentation.

²⁵ Ishaan Tharoor, "Syrians on both sides of civil war oppose breakup of their nation, study finds", the Washington Post, 19 February 2015, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/02/19/syrians-on-both-sides-of-civil-war-oppose-breakup-of-their-nation-study-finds/?utm_term=.7603e9a4bf86.

What can Europe do?

An insistence on tying de-escalation to a transition agenda – which is still the formal European line – is counterproductive.²⁶ Indeed, it will likely undermine any de-escalation initiative, feeding the regime's most paranoid fears and tendency to view any compromises in zero-sum terms. It will also encourage the opposition's most unrealistic ambitions. Europeans have not been major players in negotiations to date. They have therefore had the luxury of urging an end to the violence, while also preaching that no solution will work without progress towards transition. In the real world, these goals are incompatible. Europeans should instead work within the context of what is possible – advancing a political track that, through de-escalation and devolution, will bring some respite to the Syrian people.

The lack of any viable political track for current de-escalation initiatives creates space for Europeans to play a useful role. This track is a necessity to capitalise on the perhaps fleeting opportunity offered by US-Russian convergence. The broader deterioration in relations between the US and Russia could produce dangerous echoes in Syria at any moment. It is in Europe's strategic and moral interest to play a rapid and active role in ameliorating a framework that could help lock in de-escalation.

European states that are members of the ISSG – the EU, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and UK – should unite in backing a concept of de-escalation and devolution. This approach should:

- **Inject an immediate national devolution agenda into negotiations via the ISSG.** This should affirm the sovereignty of the central government over all Syrian territory and agree on the devolution of power to some local areas. This will aim to introduce a simultaneous national political process that can lock in localised ceasefires now being negotiated. Europeans should press the point that current efforts need a national political anchor to be successful and that the current Geneva process cannot deliver. Recognising that a final settlement will still require extensive intra-Syrian negotiations, including the codifying of any agreement, this framework should aim to lock in de-escalation and allow for longer-term intra-Syrian talks. For Western actors to support it, any agreement must grant immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access and provide a mechanism on access to detainees held by Assad (by the International Committee of the Red Cross, for instance).

- **Work to persuade the opposition of the merits of this approach.** In light of the withdrawal of the US and regional players, Europeans have growing influence with the opposition. This will not be easy but Europeans should be unified and clear that de-escalation and local autonomy now represent the best option, particularly if supported with stepped-up European stabilisation support. **European coordination with Ankara, Riyadh, and Doha**

²⁶ Author's interviews with European member state ministry of foreign affairs officials July-August 2017.

will be of importance in making the case with both the political and armed opposition. Turkey and Saudi Arabia are already pivoting in this direction, recognising the inevitability of Assad's participation in any ongoing process.

• **Discourage US efforts to fight Iran in eastern Syria.** Europeans should play off Trump's desire to avoid dragging the US into a new regional war to encourage the administration to hold back any ambitions to see Syria as a theatre in which to fight Iran. Europeans should also tie their own stabilisation support in post-ISIS areas in eastern Syria to efforts that seek to avoid wider escalation. The US is pressing for such support, expecting European governments to pick up a large share of the stabilisation tab in the post-conflict phase.²⁷

• **Work to secure Iran's agreement to the de-escalation process.** Quite simply, Iran has the capacity to spoil any agreement on Syria it does not accept. Europeans should press Iran to see a devolved approach as a means of advancing a win-win solution. During his recent European tour, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif placed renewed focus on his long-dormant four-point plan, focusing on a ceasefire and constitutional reform.²⁸ Europeans should actively explore how this can provide a bridge towards locking in de-escalation through devolution. Building on shared European and Iranian support for the nuclear deal, European members of the ISSG should be clear with the Iranian government that the lack of a settlement in Syria will impede a full normalisation of ties and feed anti-Iranian currents in Washington.

• **Help Ankara to see that a devolved approach can constrain Kurdish ambitions.** Ankara already appears to be on board with the de-escalatory approach, but its fears regarding the Kurds are potentially destabilising. Europeans should work to ensure the PYD stands aside in favour of Arab control of post-ISIS Raqqa and does not pursue efforts to link up its two territorial zones of control. Europeans should condition any ongoing political relationship and post-ISIS stabilisation support, something that Kurds are desperately seeking for areas under their control, on these steps actually taking place.²⁹ Europeans should also be clear that they do not view Kurdish areas of autonomy as preludes to independence, regardless of the outcome of referendums in Kurdish controlled areas of Syria or Iraq. Getting Turkey on board with a proposal that accepts Kurdish autonomy will take considerable work and will ultimately be linked to its ongoing internal conflict with the PKK. As well as working closely with the US to press Syrian Kurds to address Turkish concerns – especially in a post-Raqqa phase when their centrality to anti-ISIS military campaign will diminish – Europeans must remain focused on efforts that can help advance the

²⁷ Author's interviews with European member state MFA officials, July-August 2017.

²⁸ Mohammad Javad Zarif: 'Security cannot be purchased', ECFR, 26 June 2017, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/mohammad_javad_zarif_security_cannot_be_purchased.

²⁹ PYD officials say that stabilisation and humanitarian support is one of their biggest asks of European governments. Author's interview with PYD official, April 2017.

Turkish peace process. This should include maintaining attention on the peace process in high-level engagement with Recep Tayyip Erdogan and pressing the PYD to use their links to the PKK to advance a ceasefire in Turkey.

• **Propose a stabilisation partnership with Turkey in northern Syria.** While Ankara remains resistant to external support in its area of influence, it is also encountering increasing difficulties in managing the associated burdens.³⁰ Ultimately, Turkey is likely to turn towards international financial and material support mechanisms and Europeans should stand ready to provide assistance at that moment. Given the challenge posed by the HTS presence in Idlib, European states should offer enhanced support to Ankara that includes long-term counterterrorism cooperation, which could include a military as well as logistical partnership, and stabilisation assistance across the province. Europeans should also resist cutting back humanitarian aid flows into Idlib due to widening HTS domination. This would put at risk the more than 1m people estimated to be taking refuge in the province and only serve to entrench a destabilising trajectory. Europeans must work to sustain flows of humanitarian assistance into Idlib as much as possible.

• **Increase stabilisation support aimed at restoring essential services and building institutional capacity across Syria.** This should include expanded humanitarian assistance. This will be critical to securing wider buy-in for this initiative. If a political understanding can take root, European governments should step up support, delivered both via Damascus and cross-border, in a bid to support local structures. Such efforts will also be of importance in areas cleared of ISIS to stem the emergence of new forms of extremism. Given that any emerging agreement will be premised on an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the central government, Europeans will need to coordinate with Damascus. But the restoration of state control over border posts and an agreement on unhindered access for humanitarian aid could represent a means of forging an agreement whereby increased aid is delivered cross-border by the UN.

• **Pledge a degree of stabilisation assistance for regime-held areas.** European states should put an offer on the table, linking economic support to the political devolution plan. This does not mean normalisation, nor should it include reconstruction funding which should only come on the back of a final intra-Syrian settlement. But, if political benchmarks are met, it could include some recovery support and the easing of some sectoral sanctions that affect the wider population, such as those restricting financial transactions. While this should seek to circumvent Assad and associated regime cronies, in part by keeping support directly tied to local projects, the regime will still try to tightly manage this process. But this may be a price worth paying if it can help solidify regime compliance behind a sustained de-escalatory

³⁰ For more on the challenges Turkey faces managing stabilisation operations see: Aaron Stein, Hossam Abouzahr, and Rao Komar, "Post Conflict Stabilization: Turkey and the End of Operation Euphrates Shield", The Atlantic Council, 13 July 2017, available at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/post-conflict-stabilization-turkey-and-the-end-of-operation-euphrates-shield>.

approach that benefits the wider population and protects European interests. Recovery support should also be based on a national approach that binds the different zones together. Europeans could place special focus on regenerating national infrastructure and trade links. The interconnectedness of the wider economy is a critical ingredient that can be leveraged to prevent further fragmentation.³¹

The quest for European coherence

For any chance of even limited European impact there remains one critical and long-overdue ingredient: European coherence behind a common position. Without a unified position Europeans have no chance of making a difference in Syria.

Paris is likely to be the key address for any prospect of making this happen. The other key European actors engaged on this file, namely the United Kingdom, Germany, and the European Union institutions have stepped back over recent months, due to a combination of elections, absorption with Brexit, and, in the case of the EU, the non-success of its own regional initiative. Paris, by contrast, has visibly stepped up its focus on Syria under Emmanuel Macron, showing new support for a pragmatic de-escalation agenda.³² Other member states are now looking to Paris to forge a European leadership path.³³ However, Macron has not made Syria an EU issue. Instead, he has stepped up bilateral engagement with Russia and the US and proposed the formation of a new 'P5 plus regionals' contact group. He appears to see Syria as a venue for France to project great power status rather than European strength.

This is a mistaken view and one that needs to be reversed if France and Europe are going to play an effective role. On its own France brings no serious leverage to the table. Its military contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition is insufficient to influence US and Russian strategic calculations. Instead European actors, especially the UK, Germany, and the EU should encourage Macron to focus on forging a coherent and actionable European position. Rather than looking to establish a new international contact group, France should work with partners to unify a core group of European actors around a long-overdue pragmatic strategy that can use its combined muscle to drive forward the political dimension of de-escalation.

Current conditions offer a slim moment of opportunity. The choices are not pretty but a failure to act will only condemn Syria, the region, and Europe to an ongoing downward spiral. Europeans now have a chance to step forward and try and make a difference to the future of Syria; they should take it.

³¹ For a discussion on national economic interlinkages see Jihad Yazigi, "No going back: Why decentralisation is the future for Syria", ECFR, 6 September 2016, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/no_going_back_why_decentralisation_is_the_future_for_syria7107.

³² "France's Macron says sees no legitimate successor to Syria's Assad", Reuters, 21 June 2017, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-france-idUSKBN19C2E7?il=0>.

³³ Author interviews with European member state MFA officials July/August 2017.

Notes

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