

Syria and Global Security Project

Geneva Centre for Security Studies and Omran Centre for Strategic Studies

Report on the workshop:

“Prospects of cooperation on restoring stability and institutional reform in Syria”

Geneva, 21-22 September 2017

Workshop report 1
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Omran for Strategic Studies

An independent think tank and policy center focusing on presenting an objective understanding of Syria and the region to become a reference for public policies impacting the region. Omran began in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It publishes studies and policy briefs regarding Syrian and regional affairs in the areas of politics, economic development, and local administration. Omran also conducts round-table discussions, seminars, and workshops that promote a more systematic and methodical culture of decision making among future leaders of Syria. Omran's work supports decision-making mechanisms, provides practical solutions and policy recommendations to decision-makers, identifies challenges within the Syrian context, and foresees scenarios and alternative solutions.

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) is an international foundation established in 1995, with 51 member states, for the primary purpose of promoting peace, security and international cooperation through executive education, applied policy research and dialogue. The GCSP trains government officials, diplomats, military officers, international civil servants and NGO and private sector staff in pertinent fields of international peace and security.

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Workshop program

Thursday 21 September	Friday 22 September
0900-0915 Opening Remarks by the Organising Centres	0900-1000 Third Theme: Security Cooperation Session 5: Exercise on Mapping the Security Players Presentation and Analysis of the Exercise:
	1000-1015 Coffee Break
0915-1045 First Theme: Geopolitical Contests over Syria Session 1: European and Russian Perspectives on Syria within their Global Power Contest	1015-1230 Session 6: De-Radicalization and Counter-Terrorism
1045-1100 Coffee Break	1230-1400 Lunch
1100-1300 Session 2: American and Syrian Perspectives on Syria within the Global Power Contest	1415-1530 Session 7: Disarmament-Demobilization-Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR)
1300-1430 Lunch	1530-1545 Coffee Break
1430-1600 Second Theme: Cooperation on Institutional Reform and Political Transition Session 3: Institutional Reform Vs. Political Transition in Syria	1545-1715 Session 8: Concluding Remarks
1600-1615 Coffee Break	1715-1815 closing reception
1645-1815 Session 4: Prospects for Cooperation on Reconstruction between Non-regional and Local Players	
1900-2130 Outing Dinner	

1. Introduction

It took the Lebanese factions almost six years to realise the need for a political settlement to their country's bloody civil war; however, they needed nine more years to finally reach the agreement of Taif in October 1989. In this context, Lebanon's lesson to Syria is that peace requires substantial efforts to become a reality, despite the waning conflict in western Syria and the recapture of the terrorists' capital in the east. The "Syria and Global Security" project aspires to generate substantive knowledge on the positions and expectations of each party involved in Syria, in order to assess and develop avenues for peacemaking and post-war state building. This multilateral dialogue project is co-run by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and the Omran Centre for Strategic Studies. The workshops associated with the project offer a platform for experts and researchers to develop a common understanding of one another's concerns and build the mutual trust that is necessary to resolve the crisis.

This workshop took place in Geneva on 21-22 September with the participation of experts from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Syria, the UK, Ukraine and the US. The discussion was conducted under Chatham House rules, and focused on restoring stability and implementing institutional reform in Syria. The planning phase for this project – including preparatory research and interviews – took place in Moscow, Istanbul, Berlin and Washington, DC for approximately four months and involved more than 35 researchers and experts. The outcome of this phase was an assessment of the parties' concerns and a potential agenda for dialogue, which significantly informed this workshop and the overall project.

The deliberations covered three main issues: (1) Syria in the geostrategic contest between the West and Russia; (2) institutional reform and political transition; and (3) counter-terrorism and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR). This report presents a constellation of arguments distilled from the two days of deliberation, organised thematically in chronological order. Despite the editorial efforts to reorganise the discussions topically, many unanswered questions and unresolved arguments still require further discussion and assessment. More importantly, the content of this report does not represent the opinions of the report's editor or the workshop's organisers.

While the report focuses on specific discussions that took place, the overall context of the workshop should not be overlooked. Five observations highlight gaps in policies related to Syria:

- Firstly, each party expressed concern that its policies and actions were misunderstood by the other parties. The Russians expressed frustration that the West – the EU and the US – refuses to acknowledge de-escalation zones as a step towards peace in Syria. The US expressed frustration that Russia continued to fear that the US would topple Assad

by force, even though the US suspended its CIA programme supporting rebels in Syria. European experts complained that Russia lacked concrete plans for a political transition to respond to the EU's expressed willingness to contribute to reconstruction. It is clear that many serious signals have become lost in the noise.

- Secondly, all parties' positions have changed over time and mutual understanding of the need for cooperation is evolving; however, a lack of trust and infrequent communication are impeding such cooperation. Although Russia has secured the Assad regime, it has failed to gain the cooperation of the West on counter-terrorism and post-war state building. The US has become less concerned with regime change than with the issue of terrorism, and the EU has become more focused on refugees, stability, and institutional reforms than on Assad's fate.
- Thirdly, the start of a political process is central to counter-terrorism in the short term, reconstruction in the medium term, and institutional reform in the long term. The implementation of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254 provides an opening point for cooperation between the West and Russia in rebuilding Syria after the war. Policymakers, however, need to devise acceptable mechanisms for the independent and effective management of elections, for securing the political participation of eligible Syrians inside and outside the country, and for guaranteeing an independent judicial system.
- Fourthly, the vacuum in governance and service delivery constitutes an immediate threat to any temporary peace arrangement. Supporting local communities is key to stabilisation and counter-terrorism in this regard. Local community structures constitute both a short-term reaction to the de facto fragmentation of authority and a long-term strategy for decentralisation and communal power sharing within a national framework. Many participants suggested bottom-up approaches to reconstruction and state building, yet the capacity and authority of local administrative councils (LACs) to assume large-scale reconstruction operations need further discussion. The security of LACs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in opposition- and regime-controlled areas is another challenge for policymakers.
- Fifthly, cooperation on counter-terrorism will be limited due to the absence of a political process, as well as disagreements on the definition of terrorism and the methods to counter it. The disarmament of armed groups – among the opposition, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the regime's allies – is unlikely without external pressure. No interested and capable third parties can enforce a DDR process on the numerous heterogeneous factions in Syria. Policymakers face challenges related to security sector reform (SSR), the future of all sides' foreign fighters, and the integration of opposition fighters and YPG forces into the national army and society.

It should be noted that the absence of war does not guarantee an automatic reduction of violence. In both the Thirty Years War in Europe and the Lebanese Civil War between half and two-thirds of all deaths occurred during the peace process. Given the scale of the

conflict and casualties in Syria, “the war is not behind us”, as one participant highlighted. More work and cooperation are required to avoid future casualties.

2. Syria in the global geostrategic contest between the West and Russia

There was a wide consensus among participants that relations between the West and Russia are in a “state of crisis.” According to a US expert, both sides “increasingly see the other as something approaching a considerable threat, not only to its geopolitical interests but to its way of life and the sovereignty of its institutions.” The subject of conflict is centred around Russia’s place in the EU’s post-Cold War security structure, and the content and form of its relationship with the West. Most recently, the US and some European countries have accused Russia of interfering in their elections. Russia has denied responsibility and alleged that the US interfered in its 2012 elections. This increasingly hostile relationship could lead to open military confrontation, such as those in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. The various encounters between the West and Russia have therefore shaped their approaches to the Syrian conflict.

2.1 Where is Syria in this context? Why has Russia intervened in Syria?

Many experts perceive Russia's decision to intervene in Syria in 2015 as part of a wider geostrategic contest with the West. According to a Russian participant, “Defending Bashar al Assad plays a crucial role in Putin’s foreign policy goals, which revolve around two values: the protection of sovereignty and status building.” The West’s policy of regime change in Iraq and Libya, including the revolutions in the Commonwealth of Independent States, is a violation of the principle of state sovereignty and “imposes a great threat to Russia’s interests and existence,” according to a Russian expert.

The intervention in Syria has provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to realise several political goals, including (1) to prevent a regime change of one of its allies; (2) to fight terrorism and deal with foreign fighters with connections to Russia’s Muslim republics in Syria; (3) to divert the West’s pressure from Ukraine; (4) to replace local Russian news coverage of eastern Ukraine with coverage of Russia’s intervention in Syria;¹ (5) to encircle Europe with Russia’s notable presence in the Mediterranean in anticipation of any future confrontations; and (6) to use Syria as a card in the game for Ukraine against the West. According to European, US, and Russian experts, all of these objectives should compel better communication with the West following the Ukraine crisis and create an image of Russia as an indispensable partner to the West in fighting terrorism – although under Russia’s command and on its terms.

Putin has arguably succeeded only in securing the Syrian regime; however, his other goals have not been achieved, according to a Russian expert. The two main reasons for this, according to US and Russian experts, are the West’s unwillingness to accept Russian leadership in fighting terrorism and Russia’s ambiguity on what it can offer in Syria. According to a European participant, cooperation in the fight against terrorism has faltered

¹ One participant suggested that the intervention in Syria was used to distract the Russian public – specifically the ultra-nationalists – from Russia’s diminished occupation of eastern Ukraine. Hence, the Russian media replaced the map of “Novorossiya” with bombings in Syria in an expensive show of power.

due to disagreements about the definition of terrorism and the methods for countering it. A lack of trust resulting from confrontations over Ukraine, NATO, EU security, and the fate of Assad has made it more difficult to agree on a definition of terrorism and appropriate methods for fighting it.

To address disagreements between the West and Russia, a Russian expert proposed an international gathering, resembling the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which addressed European security principles and established common rules of behaviour on the international stage.² According to a Russian expert, without such a mechanism, “trust will be lacking and cooperation on Syria will be limited and fragile. There will be no information sharing on terrorism without enough trust.”

2.2 What does Syria have to do with Ukraine?

One of Russia’s reasons for intervening in Syria in 2015 was to link the situation there to the one in Ukraine. After two years of intervention in Syria, Russia has adjusted its strategy based on pragmatic calculations. According to a Russian expert, “Russian calculations are based on what is possible, compared to what is optimal”. Nowadays the connection between Ukraine and Syria is fragile and unclear, if it exists at all.

European and US participants almost unanimously rejected any link between Ukraine and Syria. A European participant suggested that the EU and NATO can be expected to “stand firm on treating the two contexts as entirely different and insisting on the terms of the Minsk Agreement being adhered to – which are not unproblematic, but not because of Syria.”

Participants from the West rejected the link between Ukraine and Syria for a range of reasons: (1) the significantly higher levels of human losses in Syria, which are not comparable to those of Ukraine, and hence the lack of justification for any concessions; (2) the relatively lesser geostrategic importance of Syria to the West compared to that of Ukraine; (3) the desire to deprive Russia of a strong hand in negotiations on Ukraine; (4) the desire not to tolerate and reward Russia’s aggressive behaviour towards its neighbours;³ (5) Russia’s attempts to exclude the US from regional diplomacy, its tendency to negotiate in bad faith, and its inability to deliver on its promises in Syria; (6) the lack of any Russian proposals for the future Syria; and, more importantly, (7) suspicion of the extent of Russia’s real leverage over Assad (and Iran, in the eyes of a US expert).

2.3 Is cooperation between the West and Russia still possible?

Despite the apparent impasse, the experts believed that de-escalation and limited cooperation might incrementally improve the West’s and Russia’s relationship with each other. A Russian expert believed that military cooperation is the only avenue available, unless European leaders adopt Russia’s position on Assad’s role in Syria. “If the US and the

² The outcome was known as the Helsinki Accords, and the conference brought together 35 states to discuss the relationship between the Western and Communist blocs in 1975.

³ A reference to the Zapad 2017 military exercises.

EU change their position on Assad, Russia's fear of a regime change will be appeased, and it could then alter its behaviour, with favourable outcomes for peace in Syria," said a Russian expert.

"Europe did not seriously challenge Assad," said a European expert. Despite Europe's negative position on Assad, its leaders did not support any decisive action against him. European leaders generally remained focused on avoiding the legacy of Iraq and Libya, preventing terrorist activities in Europe, and responding to the refugee crisis. In fact, according to a European expert, many European countries used Russia's vetoes of all UNSC resolutions against Assad as an excuse to remain "relatively uninvolved in Syria".

In fact, Europeans have long awaited a Russian proposal for keeping Assad as head of the country to assure institutional reform and political transition in order to avoid collapse. European countries are facing turbulent domestic politics; regime change has not been a European domestic priority. A 2013 UK vote to intervene in Syria is likely the only exception to this.

Despite their disagreements with Russia on many other fronts, European countries "will support an inclusive peace process that leads to a non-sectarian political system in Syria," according to a European expert. A comprehensive political process is the only guarantee of long-term stability in Syria, of preventing terrorism in Syria and Europe, and of the return of refugees. According to a European expert, "achieving these goals requires the presence of a strong central government that is able to restore sovereignty and law and order, even at the expense of human rights and justice in the short term."

US-Russian cooperation in Syria is broad enough to include many issues, yet not deep enough to reach an agreement. A US expert stated, "They both reached the chemical weapons deal in 2013, operated military de-confliction arrangements since 2015, agreed to a series of ceasefires and de-escalation zones in 2017, participated in the Geneva process, and accepted UNSC Resolution 2254, which provides a basis for a negotiated political transition. And both have a good relationship with the Kurdish PYD."⁴ Nevertheless, both a US and a Russian expert affirmed that these tactical agreements would be unlikely to increase the two countries' strategic cooperation due to disagreements about other pressing issues, such as NATO and EU security.

Ongoing allegations of Russian intervention in the US and some European elections are a major source of international contention and inflame domestic politics. The presence of Russia as a card in the US internal political scene is discouraging any attempts to reach common ground on all elements of Russian-US relations, not only the issue of Syria. This is counterproductive. A Russian participant argued that such allegations serve only to exaggerate Russia's supposed influence and capabilities, hindering a rational estimation of its power and hence "making bad policy" towards Russia.⁵

⁴ Democratic Union Party.

⁵ A Russian participant claimed that all of the news about Russia's meddling in the domestic affairs of the West actually suggests Russia's failure to influence the results of the elections. Emmanuel Macron, the current French president, won the elections despite alleged Russian intervention against him. In another example,

2.4 Can the focus be only on Syria?

Despite the complexity of the relationship between Russia and the West, the experts concluded that serious cooperation is still possible. If the US and Russia decide to “stay focused on Syria and not allow disagreements on other issues to get in the way,” then the US will expect Russia to put forward a realistic proposal for a gradual transition to a post-Assad Syria that is stable, sovereign, free from Iranian influence, and not a threat to Israel.

According to a Russian expert, a Russian strategy to resolve the conflict in Syria includes “an honourable solution for global and local elements to the conflict” (an issue that was met with understanding from US, Syrian and European experts), “no regime change before the commencement of the process, and guarantees for a regime in Syria that is friendly to Moscow.” This expert stated that “there is a need for more reception of Russia’s proposals” and that “the West should also offer alternatives and solutions.”

Notably, according to the Russian expert, “the de-escalation zones signalled to both the US and Iran that Russia’s interest in continuing the fight has declined.” Such signals suggest Russia’s interest in stabilising the situation and moving towards a political agreement. Nonetheless, recent “US policies on Iran are concerning to Russia”, because these policies complicate the prospects of bringing peace to Syria more quickly. They also prevent Russia from using its “leverage on Iran through suspending Russian air coverage of Iranian ground operations in Syria.”

The issue of Iran was a concern to almost all the participants in various ways. A US expert highlighted unease over the length of the Iranian stay and the depth of its influence in Syria. This was connected to a query over the mid-range Russian objectives for Syria and the need for a comprehensive arrangement for all foreign fighters.

The previous discussions indicated that, despite longstanding confrontations between the West and Russia, there could have been some avenues for cooperation on Syria had they agreed on the details of a political process and the tenets of institutional reform. This issue was the subject of the second part of the workshop.

3. Cooperation on institutional reform and political transition

This section of the workshop covered four broad issues in considerable detail: (1) the current and future role of local governance mechanisms; (2) the potential for cooperation on reconstruction; (3) the overlap between institutional reforms and political transition; and (4) the incentives for a political process to commence.

Hilary Clinton lost the US elections not because of Russia’s intervention, but because of the “peculiarity of the US electoral college system.” The Russian expert concluded, “Hilary won the popular vote, and this would not have happened had Russia succeeded in affecting the American voters or their voting system”.

3.1 New facts on the ground

The governance vacuum that emerged in opposition-controlled areas was largely filled by the local administration councils (LACs), “which responded to the political demands of empowering locals and democratising governance structures in their areas,” according to a Syrian expert. LACs have contributed to building domestic infrastructure for political participation (e.g. elections and governance), security arrangements (e.g. being guarantors for some de-escalation zones) and economic reconstruction mechanisms (e.g. by implementing small-scale stabilisation projects). This role assumed by civilian-led local governance bodies could assist a peaceful transition to a terrorist-free Syria.

Moreover, public and periodic free elections at the local level could contribute to the legitimacy of the LACs and the state, if the state decides to recognise the role of LACs in areas outside its control. A Syrian expert stated, “There should be a role for the LACs to contribute to reconstruction efforts in the transition period within a decentralised framework where LACs can assume planning, receive funding, and implement projects in their areas.” Once a legitimate central state is re-established, it should focus on planning and supervision, while leaving implementation to the LACs.

This current de facto decentralisation could balance the extreme centralisation of the Syrian state administration. Such a redistribution of authority from the centre to the periphery could build a healthier relationship between the state and its citizens and absolve the centre from financial and administrative burdens in times of economic difficulties. To achieve better coordination between the capital and the provinces, there should be more discussions on the allocation of authority, revenue sources and revenue collection, and monitoring and supervision powers.⁶ Specifically, a Syrian expert identified some issues for future discussions: (1) the overlap of authority between appointed and elected governors and smaller administrative entities; (2) the development of an integrated national framework that comprises all LACs, including those operating in PYD-controlled areas; (3) financial decentralisation, relationships with donors and the processes of government supervision; (4) the protection of LACs from foreign and local militias; and (5) the rules of political competition at the local level.

Addressing these questions is key to stabilisation and reconstruction in the short and medium terms and will affect the future of peace in Syria.

3.2 Will reconstruction further divide or reunite the country?

The mounting physical destruction in Syria is creating pressure to quickly start reconstruction in order to reverse the dire humanitarian conditions, incentivise the return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and restore normalcy to life; however, the absence of a political process that could bring all parts of Syria together is complicating efforts to begin effective reconstruction, according to many participants. During the workshop, two schools of thought emerged regarding solutions to this challenge:

- Firstly, some participants advocated for (1) “legalising the new local institutions and structures that emerged during the war as a short cut to stability” by freezing conflicts in various influence zones; (2) allowing the consolidation of local authorities within these zones to provide services and governance; and (3) empowering moderate opposition forces to provide security. The premises for these propositions are (i) the lack of agreement on a political process that guarantees the political and economic inclusion of the majority of Syrians; and (ii) the need to strengthen the foundations for long-term political participation by empowering local actors.
- Secondly, some participants focused on the potential consequences of ignoring Damascus in any efforts to stabilise and reconstruct the country. While they acknowledged the merits of the first school of thought, they argued that the UN should oversee cooperation among the US, Russia, and European countries to pursue “long-term consolidation” on institutional reform and political inclusion throughout Syria. There are many premises for such an approach:
 - *In the short term:* (1) the lack of sufficient control over small, undefined territories to effectively run reconstruction projects; (2) the lack of local capacity to provide services and security to all parts of Syria. In the absence of capable local administration, any reconstruction funding will serve the war economy and support warlords and militias; (3) the inability of the EU to partner with all players in opposition areas (especially in Idlib); and (4) the fragility of many local peace agreements and ceasefires, because they are susceptible to potential infighting in the short term or a return to full-scale war if the regime determines that de-escalation zones are no longer “needed”.
 - *In the medium and long terms:* (1) the ability of the centre-periphery and periphery-periphery disconnect to hinder security provisions, cooperation, economic support, and political integration; and (2) the ability of the asymmetry of access to economic resources at the national level and different modalities of local governance (i.e. in PYD-controlled areas, opposition-held areas and regime-controlled areas) to not only exacerbate inequality and social divisions, but also to provoke Syria’s neighbours, such as Turkey, Jordan and Israel.

For the EU, any plans for early reconstruction under current conditions will be considered as a contribution to the war rather than to peacebuilding efforts. According to a European expert, this could “exacerbate disunity, weaken central authority, and deepen state failure” in the long run. Nonetheless, both the US and EU are willing to incentivise sustainable peacebuilding if the regime and its allies were to show interest. According to a European expert, a minimum of political, administrative, and economic reforms that “address the root causes of future conflict, such as questions of forced displacement and expropriation of property,” would be a guarantee that would allow cooperation to commence.

In principle, Russia is open to international contributions to the reconstruction of Syria. As even with support from China and India, Russia’s financial capacity and relevant expertise do not match the significant challenges in Syria. In response to European concerns, a

Russian expert said: “Russia is willing to discuss details of institutional reform should the EU and US provide any options.” However, this expert noted that “Russia is not always successful in changing the behaviour of the Syrian regime.”

3.3 Is it really about Assad?

The participants also briefly discussed a Russian framework for a potential political transitional process. A Russian expert believed that Putin thinks that Assad and the Baath party should take part in any future elections. If they lose the elections, then the party would be guaranteed full protection and the chance to operate as part of the legitimate opposition. Russia is aware of the Ukrainian 2014 scenario, and “Putin will do his best to avoid a repetition,” according to a Russian expert.

The EU’s official position on Assad is pragmatic. EU member states do not require Assad’s removal before participating in the reconstruction of Syria. They expect a “genuine and inclusive transition, negotiated by the parties to the conflict, under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy”, where Russia and the Syrian regime are party to the Geneva process. To support this position, the EU has kept its mission in Damascus open. Nevertheless, the EU will not engage in early recovery or stabilisation efforts before the start of a concrete political process, nor will it endorse any “efforts that could support social and demographic engineering” (EU Strategy on Syria, April 2017).⁷

For the European, Syrian and US experts, the issue is not Assad as a person, but rather guarantees for institutional reforms and political transition that would prevent a relapse into war. For this reason, many European, US and Syrian participants saw advances on the political track as being unlikely if Assad remains in office. A US expert expressed the view that “an open political system and fair competition are not a realistic aspiration while Assad and the Baath government remain in power, at least not in the near term.”

The Russian experts thought that UNSC Resolution 2254 may offer a solution to the current disagreement among international parties. According to a Russian expert, a logical path is to strictly follow this resolution by drafting a new constitution and holding “free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under UN supervision that will satisfy the principle of good governance and conform to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate.”

The European and Syrian experts welcomed the idea with caution, citing Assad’s lack of good faith and the absence of institutional guarantees for an irreversible transition. A Syrian expert said that even after drafting such a constitution, “there is still a need for guarantees that the constitution will be respected.” The opposition will not feel safe sharing power with the regime as long as (1) the security agencies are allowed to arrest and kill with impunity; (2) Iranian militias continue to operate freely in Damascus; and (3) the regime deals with the opposition in terms of a “victorious” mentality.

⁷ Editorial note: [Assad is still on the EU sanctions list since May 2011](#).

Institutional reforms must build trust among all parties in Syria, according to the European and Syrian experts. These experts suggested the following reforms: banning the security agencies from interfering in politics, detaining political opponents, and using torture; providing guarantees for an independent and representative election committee; and politically and economically empowering an independent judicial system and local entities. A Syrian expert suggested additional reforms, including addressing centre-periphery relations and empowering parliament. In this vein, it is also worth considering a suggestion by a Russian participant to empower the prime minister in a bicameral parliament.

The Russian experts welcomed these suggestions for institutional reforms; however, they argued that it is important to incentivise the regime to start the reform process.

3.4 Incentives for reform

“In realistic terms, no serious funding will go through Damascus before the regime adopts a significant change of attitude towards political openness,” stated a Russian expert. According to this expert, it might be wise to incentivise the regime by linking humanitarian aid funding to the development of the political process. The expert also suggested including international economic cooperation in the Geneva process and revitalising the International Support Group for Syria – with a high potential for Russian support for such a proposal.

As an incentive for the Europeans to start reconstruction efforts, a Russian expert supported the pursuance of a bottom-up approach in reconstruction and institution building by reinforcing local and subnational entities in areas that expressed readiness for reconciliation and power sharing and created conditions to stimulate socioeconomic revival and the return of refugees. According to a Russian expert, this would have a positive impact on moderating Assad’s ambitions, given his lack of economic resources and ineffective control over every corner of Syria.

This proposition was applauded for advocating a bottom-up approach, but it was met with questions from a Syrian expert on what seemed to be unjustifiable conditionalities in its vague terms, such as “[expressing] readiness for reconciliation.” Under whose terms would this reconciliation be designed and implemented? And what conditions should shape power sharing?

A US proposal to incentivise the regime and protect the independent functioning of LACs involved the provision of reconstruction funds for elections at the local level and ensuring the independence of elected LACs. Such reforms would provide protection against local militias and the regime. However, a European expert expressed concern about merely providing funds for holding an election because an election might not produce a viable partner according to EU standards. Alternatively, tying funding to the inclusiveness and independence of LACs might be more practical and less problematic for the EU.

Should the regime and its allies show interest in starting a real political transition and institutional reform, EU member states could support Syria in three domains (EU Strategy on Syria, April 2017):

- *security*: DDR, SSR and international monitoring;
- *governance*: a constitutional process, elections and institutional reform; and
- *peacebuilding*: addressing the issues of detainees and missing persons, property dispute resolution, the return of refugees/IDPs, and transitional justice/reconciliation.

Transitional justice takes different forms, including institutional reforms to prevent a return to war. US, Syrian, and Russian experts proposed some long-term solutions to reform the bureaucracy and military based on more inclusive and professional standards, such as open and fair recruitment processes in all state institutions, the promotion of civil education, and respect for subnational identities under an overarching Syrian identity. A Syrian expert also highlighted the need for truth-finding commissions within a wider national reconciliation process in order to ensure the smooth integration of opposition entities and personnel within the national institutional framework.

Reconciliation and a political process are key to stability; however, “they come second to securing the country from terrorism,” according to a US expert. The topic of security cooperation in Syria occupied the second day of the workshop, with various connections to institutional reform and the wider disagreements between the West and Russia on the international stage.

4. Cooperation on counter-terrorism and DDR

During the second day of the workshop a lively and deep discussion touched on many issues under two broad themes: (1) how to uproot terrorism; and (2) how to deal with the proliferation of armed groups in Syria through DDR.

4.1 Uprooting terrorism: addressing the root causes

Almost all participants agreed that the recent defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) does not mark the end of terrorism in Syria and the region. As a Russian expert pointed out, “ISIS’s loss of control is not an indicator of a final defeat. [Its] media branches are still a powerful tool for propaganda and recruitment, its Shura council is still intact, and it has established a parallel command structure that ensures the continuation of operations.” In order to avoid witnessing a resurgence of another terrorist group in Syria, participants suggested the need for a political process that gives the people hope and meaning by empowering local communities to compensate for governance failure, reconstructing physical and social infrastructure to create jobs and accommodate refugees and IDPs, and engaging key militia leaders in counter-terrorism programmes to prevent their trained personnel from defecting. During the first day of the workshop participants discussed the details of a political process in Syria, while the other three suggestions dominated the remainder of the meeting.

4.1.1 Local communities and the governance vacuum

The empowering of local communities is expected to fill the governance vacuum and enhance civilian contributions to public life, thus reducing the attractiveness of terrorist organisations. “Service provision and engagement with the constituency creates a legitimacy that is hard to replace with any terrorist enterprise,” said a Syrian expert. LACs are irreplaceable because they create a sense of ownership among community members, hold elected officials accountable to the constituency, and energise popular participation in local governance. For example, in Daraya city the elected local council exercised the highest authority within its jurisdiction and oversaw all other civilian and military bodies. The Shouhada' Al Islam brigade (the local armed opposition group) was not only subject to local council supervision, but its budget was drawn up, approved and provided by the council. This structure allowed civilians to react quickly and successfully suppress al-Qaeda and ISIS sleeper cells in the city. Indeed, on three separate occasions the local armed group arrested ISIS members whom the local council had identified. Even under extreme conditions, extremism failed to spread in Daraya.

This successful example, however, does not cancel out the fact that other local councils have been “hijacked or overthrown by militias or terrorist groups in other places in Syria,” according to a US expert. A Syrian expert suggested that the workshop participants should consider the circumstances that led to the weakness of these councils in order to establish policies to prevent future failure. Providing reconstruction funds to only inclusive and independent NGOs working in local communities – an idea that was proposed earlier – is one way of protecting their neutrality, professionalism and effectiveness. This issue relates to the connection between reconstruction and counter-terrorism.

4.1.2 The link between reconstruction and counter-terrorism

The participants agreed that reconstructing cities and villages dominated by ISIS is crucial to preventing the resurgence or emergence of extremist groups. Russian and US experts accused each other of lacking plans for reconstruction. The current US administration is not interested in contributing to the reconstruction of Raqqa. According to a US expert, US officials use the term “humanitarian plus” because they know that “reconstruction” is a toxic word for the Trump administration due to problems with US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“One cent of reconstruction is worth more than a dollar of counter-insurgency,” said a US expert advocating for the need to allocate funds to rehabilitate Raqqa and insulate its inhabitants from terrorist propaganda. This relates to the current resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria after the US had believed that the group had been defeated ten years ago. The US expert said, “In retrospect, if the US had invested one-third or half of the cost of the recent operations to retake al-Anbar from ISIS from 2014 until 2017 on its reconstruction in the period after defeating al-Qaeda from 2010 until 2014, when it was captured by ISIS, we [the US] would have averted a costly, catastrophic fate for the city and its people.”

“Russia also has its own experience of reconstructing Chechnya as a tool to stabilise the region after the war in the 1990s until 2000,” said a Russian expert. “Improving deteriorating socioeconomic conditions is important to preventing terrorism, but it comes second to political and demographic variables,” a Syrian expert argued. “The primary source

of terrorism in Syria is the prevalence of confrontational approaches to the issues of political settlement and transitional justice,” the Syrian expert said. Another cause of terrorism is the mass destruction of infrastructure due to the bombing of terrorist-dominated areas. According to a Russian expert, such bombing drives the local population to become antagonistic toward the US and Russia.

The previous discussion highlighted important elements for uprooting terrorism, but only in the medium and long terms. Reaching a political solution has proven to be unlikely in the foreseeable future and empowering local communities works only in the medium term. At best, reconstruction is a long-term process that is conditioned on various inhibiting circumstances. The strategy requires a short-term policy to prevent terrorists from expanding their resources and increasing their personnel by engaging key moderate militia leaders in counter-terrorism programmes.

4.1.3 Engaging key militia leaders

A high number of trained fighters in local militias rely on external donors to fund their operations. When these external donors withdraw their sponsorship there is a risk that militias may feed terrorist activities in the future. It is essential that special attention be given to moderate militias in the form of engaging their leaders in all peacebuilding efforts. An example of the impact of key leaders’ engagement is that of Zahran Alloush. “[This] is a clear case of the ability of local leaders to successfully counter al-Qaeda and ISIS in their areas of control,” said a Syrian expert. Alloush had recognised the potential threat of rising extremism in the ranks of the uprising at an early stage. His awareness prompted a strategy to counter al-Qaeda and ISIS by challenging their narrative. This later escalated to full confrontation in the city of Douma, near Damascus.

Alloush’s personal motivation for acting against terrorist organisations might be a subject of debate – whether it was his awareness of the challenge that extremist groups might pose to his leadership or the threat to his community, or both. No one can be certain because Alloush was killed by a Russian air strike in late 2015. Regardless of personal motives, the outcome is clear: the territories under Jaish al-Islam control are free of terrorists. This organisation adamantly opposes any sort of extremism and its relationship with the elected local council is professional. Furthermore, Jaish al-Islam has been part of numerous negotiations on ceasefires and de-escalations with Russian and Egyptian mediators.

The discussion on moderate militias touched on many definitional and policy issues, as outlined in the last section.

4.2 Prospects for the DDR of militias in Syria

In discussions on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a considerable number of participants advised the use of different tactics to deal with its heterogeneous components, instead of treating them all as equally dangerous. Militarily, Russia will permit Turkey to deal with HTS in Idlib; however, there should be a non-military strategy to accommodate militias defecting from HTS, such as Nor el Din Zanki and others. The spectrum of militias in Syria is wide, and

the workshop participants rarely agreed on the various militias' strengths, ideological orientations and future roles.

Regarding Ahrar al-Sham, the US is suspicious of its real ideological orientation, because it “constantly changes its position toward other armed groups, including HTS”. According to a US expert, the best approach to Ahrar al-Sham is to balance the incentives for it to become more moderate, but without “inadvertently empowering a group that could ‘flip back’ to HTS.” This includes giving security incentives, not only to Ahrar al-Sham’s fight against HTS, but also to cutting out HTS from strategic positions in Idlib. In return, the US would guarantee Ahrar al-Sham’s positions in the local government and guarantee protection against any future regime or Russian operations against it. If it failed to deliver on fighting HTS or changed its allegiance, the US would join the Russians in strikes against it.

Dissatisfaction extended even to what used to be perceived as secular forces, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). A Russian expert said that “The Russian government is not in favour of unifying its factions in Idlib or in northern Aleppo for fighting terrorism, as it will be a threat to the Syrian Army at some point in the future. Russia would accept its [the FSA’s] consolidation only under the Syrian Army umbrella.” US experts had another concern regarding the FSA; as one said: “the FSA has been increasingly perceived as a Turkish tool to prevent Kurdish advances in the north. There is scepticism regarding the FSA’s willingness and capability to fight violent extremist organisations like HTS.” The best hope for the FSA is to be part of internal security forces in the de-escalation zones in Idlib, Homs and Lataqqiya, if it stays intact.

The lack of consensus on defining the various security players, together with the changing military balance in favour of the regime, affected how the experts envisioned the prospects for DDR in Syria. A Russian expert observed that the regime’s “victorious mentality makes it hard to discuss DDR and SSR with the Syrian regime, especially when the huge majority of Syria is under the regime’s control.” The US experts were no less blunt in their analysis.

According to one US expert, “the US has no plans to deal with the current proliferation of military formations in Syria beyond exterminating the radical elements.” The moderate opposition can be reintegrated only in the wake of a broader internal political settlement and, even then, only over time. Given that the war is not yet over, the unification of various militias will be gradual and will take a long time, as was the case in unifying the Bosnian Army. For these and other reasons, the US is unlikely to be involved in any DDR efforts in Syria except in the Kurdish area and on the southern borders with Israel.

Both Russian and US experts did not expect YPG forces to be integrated into the Syrian Army. According to a US expert, “The Kurds will seek maximum autonomy and are unlikely to meaningfully integrate their forces with others”. A Russian expert supported this conclusion, saying that the “SDF⁸ and YPG will be hard to incorporate” and suggesting that “they will be an alternative military formation in the future”.

⁸ Syrian Democratic Forces.

The Russian and US experts also agreed on the inappropriateness of the Bosnian DDR model to Syria. “Who will force the regime to implement DDR among the militias in its areas? Even Russia cannot do that,” said a Russian expert. The classical sequence for any DDR process starts with a political agreement that defines the future position and role of the various armed entities. Then DDR follows, with a trusted third party to enforce it. In Syria, there is no capacity for the UN to intervene and no interest among any country to play a third-party role. “The Balkans needed 60,000 UN peacekeepers, and Syria will need 600,000, given the scale and intensity of the conflict,” said a US expert. Only Russia can oversee DDR in regime-controlled areas, which means that no international body will be able to oversee all of Syria’s DDR efforts.

The situation in Syria is also different from that of Colombia. The FARC⁹ negotiated its surrender after the government won the war, and the rebels were promised political integration and amnesty before DDR was implemented. A Russian expert expected that “militias in Syria would not allow DDR. They need weapons to protect themselves and for political leverage in Astana.” Another Russian expert expected the Syrian rebels to learn from the Tajiki scenario, in which the rebels were crushed by the government after laying down their arms.

The security dilemma for the rebels is not determined by the threat of the regime alone, but also by the existence of Shi’a militias, like Hizbullah, which exacerbate the opposition militias’ insecurity and make DDR more difficult. The only movement towards DDR in opposition-held areas will be in tandem with external support in the opposition’s enclaves around the border. “These enclaves will be stable, should Turkey and Jordan decide to keep them calm, but no real DDR will start without a political solution,” said a US expert.

“The lack of a political track in the Astana peace process is limiting the impact of the de-escalation zones. They could collapse at any moment, with disastrous consequences,” said a European expert. According to Syrian and European experts, there is a need for a deeper discussion on the future of the various armed entities – formal and informal, Syrian and foreign – within a wider political settlement. A suggestion to form a “working group on necessary measures for DDR” was made by a European expert. The increasing cost of operations for all parties in the near future might slow down the pace of the conflict, but without external pressure for DDR the fight could resume at any moment. One of the participants warned: “The war is not behind us.”

⁹ Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.