Contextualizing the Sustaining Peace Approach in Contemporary Armed Conflicts: From High-Level International Mediation to Pragmatic Peacebuilding Initiatives in Syria

Ako Muto[1] and Rui Saraiva[2]

Abstract

As violent protracted and recurring armed conflicts are increasing in number and complexity, it became a pressing need to shed light on contemporary forms of international cooperation to resolve conflicts and build peace while examining its respective challenges and limitations. In this context, the United Nations (UN) launched the sustaining peace agenda, presenting a new narrative and approach focused on a long-term comprehensive vision of development, humanitarian, and inclusive peacebuilding activities across the peace continuum. However, the operationalization of sustaining peace is still largely untried while the full variety of assistance in complex conflict-affected situations remains unrevealed. This paper considers the importance of pragmatism and adaptiveness amidst the changing nature of violent armed conflicts, and recognizes that peace needs to emerge fundamentally from within conflict-affected situations while being assisted by international actors such as multilateral organizations, bilateral agencies, and international non-governmental organizations. Through the examination of international cooperation for peace in the context of the Syrian armed conflict, between 2011 and 2015 when no ceasefire or dominant party was foreseen, this study argues that due to the complexity and ineffectiveness of high-level international mediation, pragmatic peacebuilding initiatives represent an alternative along Syria's pathway to sustaining peace.

Keywords: Protracted Conflict, International Mediation, Peacebuilding, Sustaining Peace, Syria

1. Introduction

Since 2010, trends in violent armed conflicts have been shifting significantly, causing an impact on the inability of international peacebuilding actors to effectively prevent and respond to related crises. Quantitative data also demonstrates that since 2010, there has been a relative increase in the number of intra-state conflicts, the number of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), as well as civilian casualties and battle related deaths in urban areas. In addition, current trends also demonstrate that armed conflicts are changing in nature: they are increasingly protracted, more complex, and recur more often (UN and WB 2018). On average, civil wars last 7 years and require 14

---

[1] Senior Research Fellow, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Research Institute
[2] Research Fellow, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) Research Institute

years to recover from it economically. Chances of relapse are high, and it can take up to 25 years to rebuild lost state systems and institutions (SIPRI 2017). The protracted nature of today's complex and multidimensional intrastate wars is often the result of the fragmentation and mutation of involved parties. While a civil war is prolonged over time, the original drivers of conflict are more likely to change and require adaptive responses. The constant mutation of protracted conflicts entails a geographic dimension (the region where conflict occurs is constantly changing) and a dimension related to its intensity level (e.g., the number of battle-related fatalities varies considerably in a 7-year period). As a result, once a country or society is on a violent path, changing its trajectory towards peace becomes more difficult with time (UN and WB 2018).

Taking into consideration current conflict trends, one of the underlying assumptions is that violence will generate violence, i.e., conflict recurs in cycles resulting from seeds of violence being sown during war. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) has identified 159 recurring conflicts from 1946 until 2016. Around 60% of the total number of conflicts have recurred, and 135 different countries have experienced conflict recurrence during this period. Conflict recurrence has been even more common since the mid-1990s due to structural changes and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the average duration of post-conflict peace is only 7 years and two regions in particular accounted for increasing recurrence in the post-Cold War period, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Gates et al. 2016).

The regional concentration of violent armed conflicts shifted after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. South Asia became the center of gravity with the intensification of the conflict in Afghanistan, in 2006-2007, and the escalation of the conflict in Pakistan, in 2008, and later the Middle East, with the escalation of the war in Syria, in 2012. Overall, the majority of violent conflicts today occur in the Middle East, in South Asia, and in Africa. (Allansson et al. 2017; Sundberg et al. 2012). Another relevant fact is that armed conflicts today take place in middle-income countries, e.g., Syria and Iraq, and have much higher intensity levels and consequently much longer recovery times. This demonstrates that wealth and related indicators do not necessarily prevent conflict and when conflict occurs in middle-income countries, it dramatically reverses previous achievements in human development (UN and WB 2018). In 2017, 51% of all humanitarian funds were requested by the United Nations for crises in middle-income countries. Much of today's violence continues to be entrenched in low-income countries; however, more than half of fragile contexts are to be found in middle-income countries (OECD 2018).

Increasing complexity is another element of contemporary conflict trends. Since the end of the Cold War, the predominant form of conflict has not been between states but intrastate, often involving

the intervention of external state actors. As 18 in 47 intrastate violent conflicts were internationalized in 2016, the complexity of today's civil wars derives partially from its internationalization (Dupuy et al. 2018). Another element related to complexity is the rise of non-state actors, i.e., an increasing number of conflicts with armed groups that are not directly linked to states (e.g. violent extremist groups, armed trafficking groups, militias, etc.). In fact, non-state actors have been growing in influence and impact, claiming economic and political resources, and moved by issues related to identity and ideology. Non-state actors are also transnational, forming coalitions across states and aiming at controlling regions with unrecognized borders. This leads to the rise of cross-border conflicts, another element related to increasing complexity (UN and WB 2018). Complexity as a conflict setting or peacebuilding setting is often represented by a system that is in fast and continuous change, but whose components also have the ability to adapt. The traditional peacebuilding programming culture is not effective in such complex environments, requiring a shift from program designing to contextual adaptation, results-based monitoring, and continuous evaluation (Brusset et al. 2016).

As contemporary armed conflicts have become increasingly complex, the number of civilian victims has doubled, resulting from indirect causes, such as water contamination, lack of appropriate shelter, food and medical care. Though the number of losses has been relatively lower than the large-scale interstate wars of the 20th century, the Syrian conflict resulted in the highest number of fatalities among all the conflicts in the world in the 21st century (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015, 539). In addition, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees also has increased; e.g., in 2017, 68.5 million people were displaced due to persecution, conflict, and generalized violence (UNHCR 2018). Furthermore, the relation between conflict and terrorism also underlines the complex nature of contemporary trends. Ten countries under conflict accounted for 84% of all deaths from terrorism in 2017 and armed conflicts are considered a major driver of terrorist activity today (Institute for Economics and Peace 2018).

In the last decade, intrastate conflicts have become longer (protracted) and more complex, and recur more often, both in low-income and middle-income countries. The current international order remains a system based on principles of collective security attempting to respond to or prevent violent armed conflicts through shared peace mechanisms and shared values. However, this collective desire to achieve sustainable peace has been challenged on many fronts, in a world that is more interconnected but also more complex than ever before. Current armed conflict trends demonstrate that emerging challenges to peace in several regions of the globe are not effectively addressed by international peacebuilders and demand innovative peacebuilding strategies. New policy trends, such as the United Nations (UN) sustaining peace agenda, are attempting to develop new peacebuilding

narratives and techniques to cope with current challenges. In this article, we explore the case of complexity and international mediation in Syria and the need for pragmatic, contextualized, and local peacebuilding solutions with the potential for effectiveness in contemporary conflict-affected situations.

2. The Sustaining Peace Approach: A New Peacebuilding Narrative at the United Nations

Since its creation, the UN has been one of the main actors involved in prevention of and responses to violent armed conflicts, and the UN Charter enshrines the norms and mechanisms to achieve peace collectively. The objectives related to prevention are clearly stated in the preamble as a foundational value of the UN: "We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war" (UN 1945, 2). In addition, the Charter underlines that in order to maintain international peace and security, the UN will take concrete actions through "effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace" (UN 1945, 3). However, the UN's ability to use its full potential to respond to and prevent conflicts has often been conditioned by systemic dynamics of power. Historically, the capacity of the UN to act has been strongly conditioned by the interests of its member-states, especially the major powers with a permanent seat at the Security Council. During the Cold War, its institutional focus was to respond to armed conflicts related to decolonization and interstate conflicts that were outside the orbit of Cold War dynamics. The post-Cold War period demanded the UN to engage more actively in responses to violent armed conflicts and realize the objectives of the UN Charter. Thus, the 1992 Agenda for Peace revived the UN mechanisms to address conflict-affected situations and introduced to the policy arena the concept of 'post-conflict peacebuilding.' The 1992 Agenda emphasized a sectorial approach to conflict resolution based on four categories of interventions at different stages of the conflict cycle: 'preventive diplomacy,' 'peacemaking,' 'peacekeeping' and 'post-conflict peacebuilding' (UNSG 1992). This sectorial approach remained until several reforms were initiated in 2015 and despite the changes previously introduced by the 2000 Brahimi Report, the establishment of the 2005 peacebuilding architecture, and the development of the 2008 Capstone Doctrine. The division between development, humanitarian, and peace actors continued until the conception of the sustaining peace agenda (UN and WB 2018).

The 2016 twin resolutions on 'sustaining peace', adopted by the UN Security Council (S/RES/2282) and General Assembly (A/RES/70/262), were inspired by the need to redirect the

collective efforts of the international community to respond to today's complex and interconnected crises, moving away from linear understandings and fragmented responses to armed conflicts. The UN defines 'sustaining peace' as "both a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society, ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account" (UNSC 2016, 2). Thus, 'sustaining peace' emerged as an umbrella concept and policy framework that encompasses all activities aimed at "preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict" (UNSC 2016, 2); i.e., it incorporates, in a 'whole-of-system' approach, humanitarian assistance, peacekeeping, political mediation, peacebuilding, and development assistance.

The original concept of sustaining peace can be traced back to the idea of 'positive peace,' as first introduced by Johan Galtung. Positive peace results from the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies, as opposed to 'negative peace', the mere absence of violence. (Galtung 1969). Accordingly, the sustaining peace agenda attempts to go beyond ad-hoc responses to conflict and provides a roadmap for the UN and its member-states to synergize their efforts towards a culture of prevention. The new narrative also focuses on peacebuilding at all stages of the conflict cycle, underlining that additional and urgent efforts are fundamental in contexts where the risk of crisis is heightened and where collective efforts will effectively address risk factors that may cause violence. Enhanced coordination and coherence among humanitarian, development and peace actors, presents opportunities for mitigating risks and fostering more effective and sustainable outcomes in international peacebuilding (UNESCO 2018). For instance, peacekeeping within the sustaining peace agenda will contribute to peace efforts as a security umbrella for other actors to achieve peacebuilding objectives. Peacekeeping operations will implement early peacebuilding tasks, generating the momentum and laying the foundation for broader peacebuilding and development efforts. Therefore, peacekeeping missions will be deployed as part of a broader and longer-term strategy to support member-states in preventing conflict and sustaining peace (Guterres 2018; UN 2018).

In relation to the link between development assistance and sustaining peace, the coordination between the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and the sustaining peace resolutions represents a system-wide framework centered on long-term approaches that address the root causes of fragility and aims at building societal resilience. The SDG 16+ targets violence, abuse and exploitation; highlights the need for safe and inclusive environments; and offers a more holistic approach to good governance and institutions. The delivery of SDG 16+ requires a multi-sectoral approach that brings together various actors in different areas, e.g., governance, justice, public health, education, social welfare, livelihood, and protection. Both the 2030 Agenda and the 2016 sustaining peace resolutions offer a holistic approach that emphasizes the link between peace and sustainable development.

Because positive peace is both an enabler and an outcome of sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda also becomes a strategic entry point for sustaining peace (Mahmoud et al. 2018; UN 2015; NYU-CIC 2016). Besides the integration between peacebuilding, peacekeeping and development, the sustaining peace resolutions are also calling for all humanitarian actions to be closely coordinated with development and peace actions, in order to achieve lasting positive impacts on conflict-affected situations (DNH 2019).

In June 2015, the Report of the Advisory Group of Experts (AGE) introduced the concept of sustaining peace, leading to concrete actions to review and strengthen the UN's approach to peacebuilding. Historically, the UN has been the main international organization involved with prevention and responses to conflict; however, the 2015 review accelerated the momentum to redefine the narrative and implement international peacebuilding. In the sustaining peace agenda, peacebuilding covers all actions to respond to and prevent conflicts. Furthermore, the 2016 sustaining peace resolutions reveal an innovative organizational culture that may eventually also be assimilated by other peacebuilding actors. The fact is that the reality and practice of peacebuilding today encapsulates a variety of approaches and understandings developed by multilateral and bilateral agencies, and civil society organizations. In addition, the operationalization of the UN sustaining peace agenda remains largely untried and the full variety and characteristics of peacebuilding interactions between international, national and local actors in complex conflict-affected situations remains unrevealed. Thus, 'peacebuilding' stands today as an evolving concept in continuous transformation and depends on the interpretation of all those involved, including both external and domestic stakeholders.

Emerging peacebuilding narratives and current armed conflict trends are leading peacebuilding actors to highlight the need for coordination, pragmatism, adaptation to complex situations, and the inclusion of national and local actors. In the face of challenging trends, sustaining peace and peacebuilding require greater flexibility and politically viable short-term and medium-term actions. Traditionally, development and peacebuilding actors tend to decrease any form of engagement when violence escalates, an approach that has been proven ineffective. Therefore, building peace today implies that all related actors have a role to play during and between conflict cycles. In this context, continuous coordination within long-term actions have become essential to achieve actual peace on the ground. The 'humanitarian-development-peace nexus' and the 'peace continuum' are key terms that express this emerging policy trend. In summary, the concept of peacebuilding has become broader and wider; it was turned into an umbrella concept that integrates humanitarian assistance, political mediation, peacekeeping, development assistance, and traditional 'post-conflict peacebuilding'

interventions. However, the realization of sustaining peace depends on innovative peacebuilding techniques that allow peace to emerge from within rather than to be imposed by external actors undermining the self-organization capabilities of conflict-affected societies.

3. The Case of Complexity and International Mediation as Peacebuilding in Syria

Complex, protracted and recurring intrastate conflicts remain as the biggest contemporary threat to peace, requiring pragmatic and context-specific peacebuilding approaches to be implemented at all stages of the conflict cycle. Recognizing the context also underlines the importance of pragmatism in peacebuilding interventions by external actors, as well as the need for the inclusion of national and local actors in the peacebuilding process. The issue of context recognition is particularly relevant considering the case of international cooperation for peace in Syria, one of the most challenging political and humanitarian crises since World War II. As mentioned above, peacebuilding became an umbrella concept, which also includes, e.g., humanitarian assistance and peacemaking (international mediation). However, mediation in the context of the Syrian conflict has been described as a mission impossible where some of the world's most experienced mediators have failed. The Syrian conflict contextual analysis should not remain only inside Syrian borders. Overlapping complex contexts coexist at international, national, and local levels since the outbreak of the conflict.

In March 2011, the international community considered the Syrian civil demonstrations in Dara'a, a city in the Southern region of the country, to be the spillover of the so-called "Arab Spring," the movement of anti-government protests that resulted in the fall of various authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Dara'a demonstrations were reported to have started peacefully, yet they have spread beyond Dara'a because of brutal suppression by the regime (Marsh 2011; Human Rights Watch 2011). On the other hand, some reports mentioned that the opposition to the regime was to some extent armed from the initial stage of the demonstrations (Narwani 2014; Rosenthal 2014). The opposition groups, said to be in the thousands, were roughly divided into domestic and exile groups, and armed and non-armed groups. However, they were not able to unite themselves. The main domestic opposition group, the National Coordination Body (or Committee) for Democratic Change (NCB/NCC), formed in the spring of 2011, did not accept any violent fight, foreign military intervention, or the president's resignation. In contrast, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the main opposition group in exile, was against NCB/NCC's stance (CMES, 2012). Officially established outside Syria in October 2011, the SNC needed both the support of external actors,

including foreign governments, and the endorsement of Syrian domestic actors as it was meant to become the umbrella organization for opposition groups. However, considering that SNC efforts had failed, after the call by the United States (US) for re-examining the opposition structure (Quinn 2012), the SNC joined the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SOC), launched in Qatar, in November 2012.

The response by the international community was developed in this complex context. Moreover, in August 2011, the leaders of the US, the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Germany called for Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad to step down (BBC 2011; CNN 2011). After the failure to adopt the UN Security Council resolutions accusing the regime, by veto of Russia and China (Gutterman 2012), eleven countries[3] formed the Friends of Syria Core Group (hereinafter referred as "Core Group") in the beginning of 2012, supporting the SNC first and the SOC afterwards. At the fourth ministerial meeting of the Friends of Syria, attended by more than one hundred countries in Morocco, in December 2012, the SOC was acknowledged as "the legitimate representative of the Syrian people and the umbrella organization under which Syrian opposition groups are gathering" (Al Jazeera 2012; Morocco World News 2012).

Aside from putting effort into the adoption of Security Council resolutions, the UN also endeavored to carry out a highly complex mediation of the conflict. It appointed the 'Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States on the Syrian Crisis,' Kofi Annan, and under his coordination dispatched the UN Supervising Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), in April 2012, which due to the complexity of the situation on the ground, resulted in the withdrawal of the peacekeeping mission after only four months. Moreover, the ceasefire agreement based on the Geneva Communiqué led by Annan, in June 2012, collapsed after several hours. Hence, the UN was not able to hold the Geneva II Conference on Syria until January 2014. In this context and as it became impossible to adopt Security Council resolutions accusing those responsible for the conflict (Borger and Inzuarralde 2015), the "Core Group" framework was established as an international initiative separate from the UN Security Council.

Despite the achievements at the Friends of Syria conference in Morocco, there were some questions about what followed (Pierini 2012). The recognition of SOC was not the result of a vote or consensus. Before and after the conference, there was a wide variation of recognitions depending on each country. Firstly, some recognized the SOC as "the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people," while others acknowledged it as the "legitimate representatives of the aspirations of the

---

[3] Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, UK, and US.

Syrian people" (Talmon 2013, 227). Secondly, this recognition might have encouraged the SOC as a legitimate political actor; however, it did not guarantee an effective change of the regime. Though some countries (France, Qatar, UK and others) appointed an ambassador of the SOC, no government ended its diplomatic relations with the regime (although some declared Syrian representatives as "persona non grata"). Thirdly, the SOC was not able to attain a seat at the UN. Instead, it obtained a seat in the League of Arab States; however, it did not replace the regime, as the seat for Syria remained vacant (The Daily Star 2014). This exemplifies that the SOC was not able to evolve from a position of legitimacy toward acquiring state sovereignty. At the time of writing, the ministerial conferences of the Friends of Syria have been organized only among "Core Group" countries.

Besides the mentioned dynamics at the international level, the SOC also faced challenges from inside Syria. For example, the NCB/NCC kept its distance from the exile oppositions and decided not to become part of the SOC (IRC 2013). Moreover, it was not clear at this stage to what extent the Syrian regime relinquished its sovereignty in the country. In the 2012 Doha Debates, a member of the Qatar Foundation conducted an opinion poll covering Syria and the Middle East. Although Qatar was a member of the "Core Group", the poll demonstrated that 55% of the Syrian people supported Bashar al-Assad (Steele 2012; McDonald 2012). This poll was featured in the debate from a critical perspective, underlining its small samples and other related issues. Furthermore, the SOC was criticized for not having the intention to move its base to the opposition held area in Syria (Sayigh 2013, 29). To overcome those challenges, the SOC focused its efforts on increasing its legitimacy inside the country with the support of the "Core Group" and other member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). It established the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) in Turkey and tried to build a democratic institutional structure by setting up local councils (LCs) under the Ministry of Local Administration, SIG (CHD 2014, 6; Khalaf 2015, 24).

The LCs have been set up to fill administrative gaps in areas where the regime has withdrawn and at the local level. The LCs were considered to be the emergence of civil society in Syria (CHD 2014; Brown 2018; Favier 2016; Khalaf 2015). Some countries belonging to the "Core Group" conducted training for democratic institution building, justice, media, and others, directly given to the LCs before the establishment of the SIG. Because of such an environment, not all LCs have gathered under the umbrella of the SOC and the SIG. For example, only 15% of the LCs implemented legal regulations related to the SIG's Ministry of Local Administration (LACU and NPA 2013, 16), though the Ministry managed to supervise 760 LCs in all 14 governorates in Syria (CHD 2014, 16). Some LCs maintained relations not only with "Core Group" countries, the SOC and the SIG, but also with armed groups that directly controlled the community. Such groups respected the role of LCs and

"served to protect them from criminal elements and predatory bands of fighters" (CHD 2014, 19-20). Other LCs remained connected partially with the regime. In fact, the regime supported bakeries, garbage collection, and kept control of provision of electricity, water or other services in areas where negotiation was conducted with the offices of the governor (CHD 2014, 13-14). The regime also continued to pay the salaries of some public officials (Favier 2016, 9; Khalaf 2015, 59). Although conflict divided Syria, it became almost impossible to break-up the regime's network, as the lifeline infrastructure system remained the same as before the conflict.

The LCs as local actors, worked to build a constant relationship with the regime, the SOC, the SIG, and armed groups, so that they could maintain peace within their communities regardless of which party was in control. Simultaneously, as the SOC was based in exile, it is still unclear if it fits the categorization of 'local actor.' The "Core Group" expected the SOC to be the umbrella organization to confront the regime. However, the SOC could not provide incentives to unify opposition groups under its umbrella organization. The normative background related with the "Core Group" resulted in an attempt to implement a liberal peace approach, distant from pragmatism and planning that derives from the local context. The international community provided the SOC and opposition groups with limited support, which resulted in weakened legitimacy to exercise effectively state sovereignty when compared with the capacity of the regime.

As mentioned above, the complexity of the Syrian conflict context derives from three levels: international, national, and local. First, the complexity at the international level arose through a double framework, i.e., the UN and the "Core Group" frameworks. The UN, as in other conflict cases, took the lead for the mediation process. However, its mediation proved ineffective, as it could not coordinate the contested interests of the Security Council permanent members. This approach also did not result in a sustaining peace pathway in Syria. On the other hand, the "Core Group" alleged the illegitimacy of the regime, while its response involving opposition groups was not monolithic. The recognition of the SOC and related support depended on the political stance of each country. Nonetheless, they kept up de facto relations with the regime, respecting it as a sovereign state (Talmon 2013, 247). In sum, the "Core Group" was not able to develop a coherent mediation structure, instead backing the oppositions in a piecemeal fashion. Second, at the national level, the SOC was not able to strengthen its roots inside Syria. Although expected to become the broader representative of opposition groups (instead of the SNC), the SOC based in exile was not able to develop a strong connection with domestic oppositions and the LCs (Sayigh 2013). The SOC's legitimacy was built through providing humanitarian assistance but not all LCs relied on it. Third, at the local level the LCs maintained a direct connection with armed groups, and even with the regime, to sustain people's lives and the basic

functions of vulnerable communities living under the fragility of the conflict situation (CHD 2014; Khalaf 2015; Favier 2016).

In 2014, after formation of the so-called "Islamic State" (IS), the international community prioritized targeting IS, calling for the fight against terrorism while it suspended its mediation and support to resolve the Syrian conflict. The Geneva III conference was not held until the beginning of 2016. Meanwhile in 2015, Russia, kept supporting the regime, started bombardment in the IS controlled area, and was criticized for attacking the whole opposition held area (Cooper et al. 2015; The Guardian 2015). Later in 2015, the UN Security Council resolution 2254 was adopted, which commits to "the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic." It encourages "the establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers, which shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent while ensuring continuity of governmental institutions," and supports "the diplomatic efforts of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG)[4] to help bring an end to the conflict in Syria" (UNSC 2015, 1). The resolution was understood from both the side of the regime and that of the opposition. It neither called for the resignation of the President nor guaranteed support to the opposition groups. A similar approach was also presented in the Geneva Communiqué (UN 2012). Moreover, prior to the discussion led by the UN regarding resolution 2254, Saudi Arabia hosted a meeting with rebel groups to decide which groups would be represented among 15 delegation members participating in the discussion. The SOC joined the meeting as the major faction but not as the representative of the dissidents (Lund 2015). The complexity of the Syrian peace process at the level of international mediation as an element of the peacebuilding process has often been challenged by contextual dynamics occurring at all three levels: international, national, and local. Taking this into account, localized, people-centered and apolitical peacebuilding initiatives might hold the potential for increased effectiveness in complex and protracted intrastate conflicts.

4. Conclusion: Toward Contextualized Local Peacebuilding Initiatives

As contemporary intrastate conflicts tend to be increasingly complex, protracted and recurring in a variety of different contexts, how would peacebuilding actors be able to respond to these crises more effectively? Taking the complexity of the Syrian conflict case into account, three elements require further exploration and consideration. First, the international community should pragmatically

---

[4] The ISSG members consist of the "Core Group," China, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, Russia, the Arab League, the EU and the UN.

recognize the difficulty of dismissing the legitimacy of the de facto government, particularly if that does not correspond with the thorough and apparent will of the whole population. Even in the case of the wide dimension of the Syrian conflict, with more than 10 million people remaining in Syria, a considerable part of the population may not aspire to regime change. Moreover, taking into account the current international order, changing the regime does not necessarily lead to a ceasefire and may actually intensify the conflict. In fact, the Syrian government continued to exercise its national sovereignty while the "Core Group," the SOC, and other opposition groups have failed to achieve regime change. In situations where the government is officially recognized by the UN, respecting the de facto sovereignty exercised by the government remains as a valid starting point for negotiations towards a ceasefire and laying the foundations for a pathway to sustaining peace in which, at least, physical violence may be halted. Furthermore, respecting the principle of state sovereignty might represent a compromising but effective, contextually-adapted, and pragmatic peacebuilding approach that takes into account current conflict trends and distribution of power in an increasingly multipolar international system.

Second, the involvement of local actors in the peace talks and peacebuilding initiatives should be based on the conflict context and the environment of each community. The value and significance of their involvement is fundamental for the effectiveness of the peacebuilding process. Conflict trends demonstrate that contemporary civil wars often involve not one but various rebel groups and non-state armed actors actively participating within conflict-affected situations. Thousands of armed and non-armed rebels coexist inside and outside Syria in continuous integration and fragmentation. Current conflict analysis tools are still not able to provide the full description of all rebel groups and their continuous change and engagement in contexts like Syria. The constant fragmentation and complex characteristics of these actors result in an inability to gather full support from a wide majority of the population affected by conflict, consequently making any agreement ineffective. While some suggest that the participation of all groups should be possible in the peace process, others defend the exclusion of extremist or terrorist groups from the peace process as inevitable. In this regard, a clearer definition and assessment tool to determine what consists "extremism" or "terrorism" depending on each context should provide extra room for increased effectiveness in the mediation process. As local actors will inevitably have to deal with extremist groups, if the international community actively negotiate with these groups, this will increase the chances of effectively supporting the people that remain unwillingly under their control.

Third, the realization of the sustaining peace agenda in a multipolar world requires the international community to recognize that a unified direction or common understanding of

peacebuilding is currently nonexistent. Sustaining peace will depend on the adjustment to this reality and the self-interest of all involved stakeholders before facing peace talks. In the case of the Syrian conflict, international mediation attempts through the UN were ineffective. Simultaneously, the "Core Group" attempted to foster a regime change, while Russia, China, and Iran continued to support the regime. In the Syrian case, peace was not yet able to emerge from within, i.e., not all Syrian parties have been involved in the ongoing and complex pathway to sustaining peace. Furthermore, a formal or informal structure to coordinate the interests of all involved stakeholders is strongly needed. In this study, the case of the complex and protracted armed conflict in Syria served to demonstrate the need to refocus international peacebuilding during conflict, from ineffective high-level international mediation to contextualized local peacebuilding initiatives, particularly during the stage when the dominant party of the conflict and the direction of ceasefire are unclear. Thus, this study does not cover the whole period of the conflict, which is still ongoing at the time of writing. Further analysis of peacebuilding programs at all stages of the Syrian conflict and its aftermath will shed light on how local people on the ground are allowed to actively join the peace process and benefit fairly from the peace dividends based on each context. This will enrich and deepen the adaptive approach toward sustaining peace in contemporary complex, protracted, and recurring conflicts.

References

Advisory Group Experts. 2015, *The Challenge of Sustaining Peace. Report of the Advisory Group of Experts for the 2015 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture.* New York: United Nations.

Al Jazeera. 2012, "'Friends of Syria' Recognize Opposition," *Al Jazeera*, 12 December, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/201212124541767116.html, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Allansson, Marie, Erik Melander, and Lotta Themnér. 2017, "Organized Violence, 1989–2016," *Journal of Peace Research* 54(4): 574-587.

British Broadcasting Corporation. 2011, "Syria Unrest: World Leaders Call for Assad to Step Down," *BBC News*, 18 August, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14577333, accessed on 12/02/2019.

Borger, Julian, and Bastien Inzaurralde. 2015, "Russian Vetoes are Putting UN Security Council's Legitimacy at Risk, says US," *The Guardian*, 23 September, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/23/russian-vetoes-putting-un-security-council-legitimacy-at-risk-says-us, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Brown, Frances Z. 2018, *Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Brusset, Emery, Cedric de Coning, and Bryn Hughes. 2016, *Complexity Thinking for Peacebuilding Practice and Evaluation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cable News Network. 2011, "U.S., Europe Call for Syrian Leader al-Assad to Step Down," *CNN Politics,* 19 August, https://edition.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/08/18/us.syria/index.html, accessed on 19/09/2019.

Carnegie Middle East Center. 2012, "Syria in Crisis. National Coordination Body for Democratic Change," *DIWAN Middle East Insights from Carnegie*, 15 January, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48369?lang=en, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. 2014, *Local Administration Structures in Opposition-Held Areas in Syria.* Genève: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.

Cooper, Helene, Michael R. Gordon, and Neil MacFarquhar. 2015, "Russians Strike Targets in Syria, but not ISIS Areas," *The New York Times*, 30 September, https://www.nytims.com/2015/10/01/world/europe/russia-airstrikes-syria.html, accessed on 12/02/2019.

Do No Harm. 2019, ""Do No Harm': How Aid Can Support Peace – or War," http://www.donoharm.info/V1/content/conflict/concept.php, accessed 08/05/2019.

Dupuy, Kendra, Scott Gates, Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, Ida Rudolfsen, Siri Aas Rustad, Håvard Strand, and Henrik Urdal. 2017, *Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2016, Conflict Trends, 2.* Oslo: PRIO.

Favier, Agnès. 2016, "Local Governance Dynamics in Opposition-controlled Areas in Syria," in Narbone Luigi, Agnès Favier, and Virginie Collombier, eds., *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, Florence: European University Institute, 6-15, http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/41644, accessed on 11/08/2019.

Galtung, Johan. 1969, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (3): 167-191.

Gates, Scott, Håvard Mokleiv Nygård, and Esther Trappeniers. 2016, *Conflict Recurrence, Conflict Trends*, 2. Oslo: PRIO.

Guterres, António. 2018, "Remarks to Security Council High-Level Debate on Collective Action to Improve UN Peacekeeping Operations," https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-03-28/collective-action-improve-un-peacekeeping-operations-remarks, accessed on 22/05/2019.

Gutterman, Steve. 2012, "Russia won't Back U.N. Call for Syria's Assad to Go," *Reuters*, 27 January, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-russia/russia-wont-back-u-n-call-for-syrias-assad-to-go-idUSTRE80Q0I620120127, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Human Rights Watch. 2011, "Syria: Security Forces Kill Dozens of Protesters," 24 March, https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/24/syria-security-forces-kill-dozens-protesters, accessed on 19/09/2019.

Institute for Economics and Peace. 2018, *Global Terrorism Index. Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, http://visionofhumanity.org/reports, accessed on 10/04/2019.

Integrity Research Consultant. 2013, "Policy Briefing: the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change," https://www.integrityglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/NCB-Policy-Brief-Nov-2013.pdf, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Khalaf, Rana. 2015, "Governance without Government in Syria: Civil Society and State Building during Conflict," *Syria Studies*, 7(3): 37-72.

Local Administration Councils Unit and Norwegian People's Aid Organization. 2013, *The Indicator of Needs for the Local Councils of Syria, Report of Public Policies*, https://www.peacefare.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Needs-for-the-Local-Councils-of-Syria-Public-Policy-Report.pdf, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Lund, Aron. 2015, "Syria's Opposition Conferences: Results and Expectations," *DIWAN: Middle East

Insights from Carnegie, 11 December, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62263, accessed on 22/11/2019.

Mahmoud, Youssef, Lesley Connolly, and Delphine Mechoulan. 2018, *Sustaining Peace in Practice: Building on What Works*. New York: International Peace Institute.

Marsh, Katherine. 2011, "Syrian People Outraged over Government Shootings in Daraa," *The Guardian*, 24 March, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/24/syria-shootings-daraa-government, accessed on 19/09/2019.

McDonald, Charlotte. 2012, "Do 55% of Syrians really Want President Assad to Stay?" *BBC,* 25 February, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17155349, accessed on 11/11/2019.

Morocco World News. 2012, "'Friends of Syria' to Endorse New Opposition Group," *Morocco World News*, 12 December, https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2012/12/69626/friends-of-syria-to-endorse-new-opposition-group/, accessed on 09/21/2019.

Narwani, Sharmine. 2014, "Syria: The Hidden Massacre," *RT*, 7 May, https://www.rt.com/op-ed/157412-syria-hidden-massacre-2011/, accessed on 20/09/2019.

New York University Center on International Cooperation. 2016, "SDG Targets for Fostering Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies," https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/peaceful_just_inclusive_targets_analysis_aug2016.pdf, accessed on 07/03/2019.

Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. 2018, *Crises in Middle-Income Countries*. Paris: OECD.

Pettersson, Therése and Peter Wallensteen. 2015, "Armed Conflicts, 1946–2014," *Journal of Peace Research* 52(4): 536-550.

Pierini, Mark. 2012, "Syria: Evaluating the Marrakesh Conclusions," *Carnegie Europe*, 17 December, https://carnegieeurope.eu/2012/12/17/syria-evaluating-marrakesh-conclusions-pub-50393, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Quinn, Andrew. 2012, "Clinton Calls for Overhaul of Syrian Opposition," *Reuters*, 1 November, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-usa-idUSBRE89U1AY20121031, accessed on 21/09/2019.

Rosenthal, John. 2014, "An Eyewitness to the Syrian Rebellion: Father Frans in His Own Words," *The Bric Post*, 19 April, http://www.thebricspost.com/an-eyewitness-to-the-syrian-rebellion-father-frans-in-his-own-words/#.XdIjgW5uKHv, accessed on 20/09/2019.

Sayigh, Yezid. 2013, *The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem.* Lebanon: Carnegie Middle East Center.

Steele, Jonathan. 2012, "Most Syrians back President Assad, But You'd Never Know from Western Media," *The Guardian*, 17 January,

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/17/syrians-support-assad-western-propaganda, accessed on 11/11/2019.

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 2017, *SIPRI Yearbook 2017. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sundberg, Ralph, Kristine Eck, and Joakim Kreutz. 2012, "Introducing the UCDP Non-State Conflict Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (2): 351-362.

Talmon, Stefan. 2013, "Recognition of Opposition Groups at the Legitimate Representative of a People," *Chinese International Law* 12 (2): 219-253.

The Daily Star. 2014, "Syria Opposition 'Not Yet Ready for Arab League Seat,'" *The Daily Star,* 9 March, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Mar-09/249749-syria-opposition-not-yet-ready-for-arab-league-seat.ashx, accessed on 22/11/2019.

The Guardian. 2015, "'More than 90%' of Russian Airstrikes in Syria have not Targeted Isis, US says," *The Guardian,* 7 October, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targetting-isis, accessed on 12/02/2019.

United Nations. 1945, Charter of the United Nations, Statute of the International court of Justice. https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf, accessed 17/04/2019.

_____. 2012, "Identical Letters Dated 5 July 2012 from the Secretary-General Addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council," A/66/865–S/2012/522. New York: United Nations.

_____. 2015, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.* A/RES/70/1. New York: United Nations.

_____. 2018, *Action for Peacekeeping. Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations*. New York: United Nations.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2018, *Long Walk of Peace. Towards a Culture of Prevention.* Paris: UNESCO.

United Nations General Assembly. 2016, *Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture.* A/RES/70/262. New York: United Nations.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2018, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017*. Geneva: UNHCR.

United Nations Security Council. 2015, *Resolution 2254.* S/RES/2254. New York: United Nations.

_____. 2016, *Resolution 2282*. S/RES/2282. New York: United Nations.

United Nations Secretary General. 1992, *An Agenda for Peace. Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping*. A/47/277. New York: United Nations.

United Nations and World Bank Group. 2018, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. Washington D.C.: World Bank Group