



International Peace Efforts in the Syrian Civil War: The ‘Inevitable’ Failure?

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to assess international negotiation efforts towards ending the civil war in Syria. Although many peace events have been organised since the beginning of the civil war, the existing literature has paid little attention to the impact of international peace efforts in ending the Syrian war. The article aims to close this gap by assessing major peace efforts between 2011 and 2019; The Arab League Peace Plan, the United Nations peace initiatives, and the Geneva, Vienna and Astana peace talks. It analyses these efforts through official reports and documents published by the UN, US, Republic of Turkey, UN Security Council, and members of peace initiatives. These documents are complemented by newspaper articles showing the official views of the regional and global actors as well as the key agents of the conflict. Therefore, the article reveals the reasons for the failure of these conflict resolution efforts. The Syrian government’s reluctance to end the conflict in a non-violent way, the armed groups’ dream of territorial gains and regional and global powers’ involvement in the conflict prevented the solution of the conflict. It utilises official negotiations and ripeness approaches to investigate the insights and contents of peace efforts. The article argues that the regional and global powers have acted as facilitators instead of mediators in the peace talks. It finds that even though these peace events are viewed as official negotiations, they are only pre-negotiation efforts.

Keywords: Syrian Civil War, Peace Efforts, International Negotiations, Conflict Resolution, United Nations

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Suriye İç Savaşı'nda Uluslararası Barış Görüşmeleri: 'Kaçınılmaz' Başarısızlık Mı?

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Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, Suriye İç Savaşı'nı sona erdirmeye uluslararası görüşmelerin etkisini analiz etmektir. Savaşın başlamasından bugüne çok sayıda barış görüşmesi yapılsa da, mevcut literatürde uluslararası barış görüşmelerinin Suriye savaşını sona erdirmeye etkisi yeterli düzeyde yer bulmamaktadır. Makale, literatürdeki bu boşluğu 2011-2019 yılları arasındaki temel barış çalışmalarını inceleyerek doldurmayı hedeflemektedir: Arap Birliği Barış Planı, Birleşmiş Milletler (BM) barış girişimleri, Cenevre, Viyana ve Astana barış görüşmeleri. Bu görüşmeler; BM, ABD, Türkiye, BM Güvenlik Konseyi ve barış görüşmeleri sonunda deklare edilen resmi raporlar aracılığıyla analiz edilmektedir. Bölgesel ve uluslararası aktörlerin ve çatışmadaki kilit grupların görüşleri de gazete arşivleri yoluyla incelenmektedir. Bu sayede, çatışma çözümü çalışmalarının başarısız olma nedenleri açığa çıkartılmaktadır. Araştırma, barış çalışmalarını analiz edebilmek için uluslararası görüşmeler ve uygunluk-hazırlık (ripeness) teorik yaklaşımlarından faydalanmaktadır. Makalenin iddiası; bölgesel ve uluslararası güçlerin barış görüşmelerinde tarafsız birer arabulucu yerine yalnızca kolaylaştırıcı görevi gördüğüdür. Makale, şimdiye kadarki barış çalışmaları resmi görüşmeler olarak nitelense de, aslında bu çalışmaların resmi görüşmeleri gerçekleştirebilmek için bir hazırlayıcı, yani ön görüşmeler olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye İç Savaşı, Barış Çalışmaları, Uluslararası Görüşmeler, Çatışma Çözümü, Birleşmiş Milletler

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1. Introduction

When anti-regime protests began in Arab countries, the concerns of protesters in Middle Eastern and North African countries were similar; authoritarian governments, undemocratic political system, serious human rights issues, income inequality and unemployment. Although these were initially peaceful protests, demonstrations rapidly turned into violent conflicts when they were met with attacks from governments, regime forces, armies and pro-government groups. The peaceful demonstrations in Syria had similar responses by authorities short after its initiation. After protesters called Bashar al-Assad to resign, the torture of arrested students and attacks of security forces on civilians caused the transformation of the unrest to an armed conflict in March 2011.¹ Since then, violence escalated through an initial conflict between moderate opposition groups and the Syrian army, then transformed to a proxy warfare through the use of terrorist groups, rebels and sub-state armed groups, and finally a total war through the direct involvement of regional and global powers. From March 2011 to early 2019, more than 560,000 people were killed, including 230,000 civilians. 5,7 million Syrians left the country and 6,1 million people had to displace internally.² Therefore, it is one of the worst humanitarian crises since the end of World War II, which needs to be resolved in a political, non-violent way.

Political efforts to end the Syrian civil war have been initiated shortly after the beginning of the civil war. While the first peace initiative was organised by the Arab League (AL), its failure led to the United Nations (UN) to take action by pushing the Assad regime to a peaceful resolution. Many attempts were organised by states and non-state actors including

¹ "Syria: The Story of the Conflict," *BBC*, March 11, 2016, accessed April 22, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>; HRW, "We've Never Seen Such Horror," *Human Rights Watch*, June 1, 2011, accessed April 22, 2017; "With Thousands in Streets, Syria Kills Protesters." *New York Times*, March 26, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/world/middleeast/26syria.html>.

² "Syria Civil War: Fast Facts," *CNN*, October 11, 2019, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/index.html>; "560,000 Killed in Syria's War According to Updated Death Toll," *Haaretz*, December 10, 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/560-000-killed-in-syria-s-war-according-to-updated-death-toll-1.6700244>; "Death Tolls," *Iam.Syria*, accessed September 6, 2019, <http://www.iam.syria.org/death-tolls.html>.

Russia's peace initiatives between 2012 and 2013, the Group of Friends of the Syrian People formed by France in 2012,³ the 16th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement initiated by Iran in 2012, the Riyadh Conference organised by Saudi Arabia in 2015, and efforts initiated by UN envoys Kofi Annan in 2012, Lakhdar Brahimi in 2012, and Staffan de Mistura in 2015.⁴ Therefore, peace attempts rapidly became international events through regional and international agents.

Despite various peace attempts in eight years, the existing literature has paid little attention to the influence of peace efforts in ending the civil war. Instead, the literature predominantly focuses on proxy warfare, ethnic and sectarian dimensions of the conflict, refugee issues, and securitisation of the conflict by regional and international powers.⁵ The paper asks the following question: What is the influence of international peace efforts towards ending the Syrian civil war? To answer this question, it is crucial to select major peace initiatives. The article utilises international negotiations approach to select peace efforts for the analysis. The existing literature on official negotiations suggests that a negotiation process should bring all conflicting parties together.⁶ Following this argument, the article selects peace events which brought conflicting parties, including the Assad regime, to the negotiating table: the AL Peace Plan, the UN peace efforts, Geneva Conferences, Vienna Peace Talks and Astana Talks. In addition to the conflicting parties, these events brought regional and global actors

³ "The Second Conference of the Group of Friends of the Syrian People Will Take Place in İstanbul," *MFA*, Ankara: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1.

⁴ Magnus Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria: Initiatives, Strategies, and Obstacles, 2011–2016," *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no.2 (June 2016): 273-288, doi: 10.1080/13523260.2016.1192377.

⁵ Ted Galen Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24, no.1 (February 2013): 1-11, doi: 10.1215/10474552-2018988; Alexander De Juan and André Bank, "The Ba'athist Blackout? Selective Goods Provision and Political Violence in the Syrian Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no.1 (January 2015): 91-104, doi: 10.1177/0022343314559437; Reese Erlich, *Inside Syria* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2016): 1-10; Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria," 273-275; İ. Aytaç Kadioğlu, "Crossing the Border of Life: Is the European Union a Safe Haven for Syrian Refugees? [Yaşamın Sınırını Geçmek: Avrupa Birliği Suriyeli Sığınmacılar İçin Güvenli Bir Liman Mı?]," in *Ortaoğu'da Göç Hareketleri ve Değişen Dinamikler*, eds. Ertan Özensel et al. (Konya: Aybil, 2018), 48.

⁶ Daniel Druckman. "Dimensions of International Negotiations: Structures, Processes, and Outcomes," *Group Decision and Negotiation* 6, no.5 (September 1997): 395-420.

together. The article utilises official reports, statements of states and international organisations, and newspaper articles to assess this influence.

The article is structured as follows: The first section discusses international negotiation and ripeness theories to understand how and why conflict resolution efforts in Syria have been failed. The second section explains the background of the Syrian civil war. The third section analyses international peace attempts towards ending the civil war in Syria. The article concludes that political resolution in Syria has depended upon the goals and national interests of regional and global powers which make it very difficult to establish a peace agreement.

2. Theoretical Approaches

For a successful conflict resolution process, peace efforts should embody several different dimensions: not only actors and agents of peace negotiations but also discussions, context and timing of peace negotiations. While the discussions provide an understanding of the insight of the talks, the context reveals under which conditions peace initiatives were achieved and the timing assesses whether the time of these initiatives was right for sustainable peace. The article, therefore, utilises official negotiations and ripeness approaches to understand the root causes of failures of peace efforts.

2.1. Official Negotiations

Official negotiations are formal initiatives, which contain different actors and conditions. The official negotiation literature suggests that these negotiations should include both supporters and opponents of a political resolution, and address political agents' role at the national and global conflict resolution attempts.⁷ Further, it is a prerequisite that all conflicting parties should sit at the negotiating table for the success and comprehensiveness of these talks.⁸ The Syrian civil war has witnessed

⁷ Landon E. Hancock, "The Northern Irish Peace Process: From Top to Bottom," *International Studies Review* 10, no.2 (June 2008): 214.

⁸ Richard Jackson, "Successful Negotiation in International Violent Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no.3 (May 2000): 323-343.

several issues with the representativeness of conflicting parties. For example, the Syrian government accused the opposition forces of being terrorists and thus refused to sit at the negotiation table with them. Thus, these assumptions are assessed to comprehend the influence of this condition in the route of international peace efforts.

Furthermore, negotiations have different conditions and classifications in distinctive fields. It is identified as a useful tool for handling disputes, which describes not a single process or one discrete dispute. Instead, it is a foregoing setting of relevant acts including disputants, conditions and decisions.⁹ Therefore, it needs a sustainable process to end a violent conflict that pays attention to the demands of all conflicting parties. Fisher and Ury developed a model called ‘principled negotiation’ focusing on interest and invent choices of conflicting parties for the collective benefit (rather than focusing on people in trouble), and insisted on objective criteria to investigate resolutions.¹⁰ The term ‘collective benefit’ can have an impact on equality in a decision-making process.

Diplomacy is a crucial dimension of a negotiation process, as it remains the key point of peacemaking action despite the possible change in negotiation efforts from one condition to another. It explains ‘track-one’ diplomacy that defines problem-solving efforts at the state level through official resolution attempts.¹¹ Although these diplomatic efforts do not provide an outcome for a political settlement, they can be seen as steps towards the final agreement. According to Fisher, official and informal diplomatic interventions together provide a positive outcome through the complementarity of these conflict resolution efforts.¹² It can add value to negotiations by expanding the agreed points to the grassroots level, which helps reach sustainable peace in some cases, but not in others.¹³ This condition provides an understanding of why numerous peace initiatives

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Roger Fisher and William L. Ury, *Getting to Yes* (London: Business Books, 1996): 14.

¹¹ Oliver P. Richmond, “Rethinking Conflict Resolution: The Linkage Problematic between ‘Track I’ and Track II,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 21, no.2, (August 2001): 1-14.

¹² Ronald R. Fisher, “Coordination between Track Two and Track One Diplomacy in Successful Cases of Prenegotiation,” *International Negotiation* 11, no.1, (January 2006): 65-89.

¹³ Caroline A. Hartzell, “Explaining the Stability of Negotiated Settlements to Intrastate Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 43 no.1, (February 1999): 3-20; Roy Licklider, “The Consequences of Negotiated Settlements in Civil Wars, 1945-1993,” *The American Political Science Review* 89, no.3, (September 1995): 681-690.

have not provided a suitable ground for ending violence in Syria for several years.

2.2. Ripeness

There is an idea that certain times are better for beginning negotiations than other times. These certain times embody several different efforts including pre-negotiations, clandestine negotiations, negotiating for a settlement, acquiring endorsement, application and institutionalisation.¹⁴ The framework of ripeness can be used as a predictive tool. However, it is claimed that to demonstrate whether a specific time for negotiation is a ripe moment or not depends on if a conflict has successfully been resolved.¹⁵

A ripe moment shows a suitable time to reduce tension between the main armed protagonists including states and intractable terrorist groups. This moment has three aspects: a 'hurting stalemate' at which the combatants should feel that the stalemate imposes unacceptable costs to all conflicting parties; the valid interlocutors who could help bring the majority of their followers to establish a peace agreement; and a framework for the route of negotiations to establish an agreement.¹⁶ The ripeness will be assessed through these aspects by analysing whether the Syrian government and opposition groups were ready for a political resolution, the regional and international actors aimed to establish a peace agreement or to control the region, and the frameworks of peace plans were inclusive. Mediators have to explore this moment for resolving conflicts successfully since intervening in a conflict at a non-ripe time may be devastating (e.g. undermining trust or escalating the conflict), as unripe moments cannot be changed to ripe moments by skilful third parties.¹⁷ It means that even though a mediator

¹⁴ Adrian Guelke, "Negotiations and Peace Processes," in *Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence, Peace Processes*, eds. John Darby and Roger MacGinty (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 56; Louis Kriesberg, "Timing and the Initiation of De-Escalation Moves," *Negotiation Journal* 3, no.4, (1987): 375-384.

¹⁵ Eamonn O'Kane, "When Can Conflicts Be Resolved? A Critique of Ripeness," *Civil Wars* 8, no.3-4, (December 2006): 281.

¹⁶ I. William Zartman, *Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars* (Washington: Brookings, 1995): 1-20.

¹⁷ Richard Haas, *Conflicts Unending: The United States and Regional Disputes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 139; Landon E. Hancock, "To Act or Wait: A Two-Stage View of Ripeness," *International Studies Perspectives* 2, no.2 (May 2001): 195-205.

is powerful and has an influence on conflicting parties, these conditions may not be sufficient for establishing an agreement as other psychological and motivational factors are also crucial.¹⁸ The moments to intervene in intra-national conflicts are essential for understanding the influence of international negotiations towards ending the Syrian war.

3. The Background of the Syrian Civil War

When the Arab uprisings spread in Syria, the initial protests in early 2011 were against corruption, economic stagnation and oppression of the Syrian government.¹⁹ The peaceful protests turned into violence after the Syrian government tortured and killed numerous protesters in the city of Deraa in March 2011 because the protesters defended the motto of ‘the people want the fall of the government’.²⁰ The Assad administration was accused of ethnic massacres in Telkalakh, Daraya, Damascus and several other cities.²¹

The anti-regime protests escalated into civil war through rebellions against security forces. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) was the first insurgency group which was formed by defected Syrian Armed Forces officers in July 2011. The FSA aimed to fight against Syrian security forces for a democratic country, which would only be possible through Assad’s removal. After the AL’s monitoring mission failed, the war between the Syrian regime forces and opposition groups became more devastating. Then, the UN officially announced that Syria was in a civil war.²² The rise of Jihadist groups, including al-Nusra front, caused deterioration of the civil war as these groups aimed to control strategic locations, e.g. Taffanoz airbase. Then, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s (PKK) Syrian branch the Democratic Union

¹⁸ Peter T. Coleman, “Redefining Ripeness: A Social-psychological Perspective,” *Peace and Conflict* 3, no.1 (1997): 81-103; Marieke Kleiboer, “Ripeness of Conflict: A Fruitful Notion,” *Journal of Peace Research* 31, no.1 (February 1994): 109-116; Dean G. Pruitt, “Ripeness Theory and the Oslo Talks,” *International Negotiation* 2, no.2 (January 1997): 237-250.

¹⁹ Paul D. Miller, *Getting to Negotiations in Syria: The Shadow of the Future and the Syrian Civil War*, No.PE-126-OSD (California: RAND, 2014).

²⁰ De Juan and Bank, “The Ba’athist Blackout,” 93.

²¹ Christopher Phillips, “Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no.2, (March 2015): 359-360.

²² “UN Envoy Calls for Transitional Government in Syria,” *BBC*, June 30, 2012, accessed November 26, 2013, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18650775>.

Party/People's Protection Units (PYD/YPG) began to fight against rebel groups, the Syrian army and defected government forces for capturing strategic cities.²³

The opposition groups declared war on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant-ISIL, and by its Arabic acronym DAESH) immediately after its foundation in 2013 which changed the nature of the conflict. Then, the proxy warfare campaign of regional and global powers started. While the US and European countries have officially supported the terrorist group PYD/YPG to fight ISIS, Russia has been backing the Baathist regime. Turkey has supported the FSA and has been against the PYD/YPG since the beginning of the conflict because this group is the Syrian branch of the PKK which killed thousands of civilians and security forces in Turkey.²⁴ In addition, there have been several fights between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is dominated by the PYD/YPG, FSA and al-Nusra Front in late 2013. This frontline war has continued through the opposition groups to retake Idlib to Azaz towns by March 2014.²⁵ However, the link between the PYD/YPG and the Syrian government is weak since Kurdish armed groups occupy areas and aim to form an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria.²⁶

After the use of armed groups as proxies for a long time, Russia intervened in the war following the official request of Bashar al-Assad's government. The Russian Air Forces organised airstrikes against both ISIS and FSA on September 30, 2015. This made the war more complicated as the US administration began to officially support the YPG. The Obama administration's resupply of the YPG was explained through the US administration's aim to balance Russia's intervention.²⁷ Together with

²³ İ. Aytaç Kadioğlu, "Not Our War: Iraq, Iran and Syria's Approaches towards the PKK," *The Rest: Journal of Politics and Development* 9, no.1 (Winter 2019): 44-57.

²⁴ İ. Aytaç Kadioğlu, "The Oslo Talks: Revealing the Turkish Government's Secret Negotiations with the PKK," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no.10 (2019): 920.

²⁵ Fred H. Lawson, "Syria's Mutating Civil War and Its Impact on Turkey, Iraq and Iran," *International Affairs* 90, no.6 (November 2014): 1355.

²⁶ Hafeez Ulla Khan and Waseem Khan, "Syria: History, The Civil War and Peace Prospects," *Journal of Political Studies* 24, no.2 (December 2017): 564.

²⁷ "U.S. Airstrikes Hit ISIS Targets Inside Syria," *CNN*, September 23, 2014, accessed October 2, 2014, http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/22/world/meast/u-s-airstrikes-isissyria/index.html?hpt=hp_t1.

the Iranian support for the Syrian government, Syria, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah formed a very strong coalition against rebel forces.²⁸

The Turkish army also directly intervened in the conflict in Jarablus controlled by ISIS, through the operation “Euphrates Shield” as President Erdoğan stated that the operation was against the terrorists ‘who threatened our country in northern Syria.’²⁹ While the PYD/YPG was rapidly controlling the majority of northern Syria, Turkey restricted its aim to push the PYD/YPG in the east of Euphrates River.

Through the organised attacks of the US coalition and Russia, ISIS gradually lost the territories under its control. Then, on December 6, 2017, Vladimir Putin announced that the ISIS was completely defeated.³⁰ Considering the common goal of the US and Russia on the Syrian civil war was to defeat ISIS, they were expected to leave the country. Seven months later, the Assad government took control of Aleppo, Daraa and Quneitra.³¹ Then, in 2019, Turkey operation “Peace Spring” for securing the Turkey-Syria border from terrorist organisations. One week later, Turkey was forced by the US and Russia to stop its operations. After several bilateral meetings, both countries reached an agreement with Turkey on temporary ceasefires and the removal of the PYD/YPG from 440 kilometres of the border. Following the PYD/YPG’s thirty kilometres withdrawal from the frontier and move out of the region, Turkish and Russian troops would initiate joint patrolling in the safe zone.³² Today, the civil war in Syria still maintains even though ISIS has been defeated some time ago. The war

²⁸ “Syria’s Army, Allies Plan Offensive against Insurgents in Aleppo,” *Reuters*, October 14, 2015, accessed 14, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/10/14/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels-idUKKCN0S71VO20151014>.

²⁹ “Erdoğan Says Syria Operation Aimed at IS Jihadists, Kurdish PYD,” *France 24*, August 24, 2016, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.france24.com/en/20160824-erdogan-says-syria-operation-aimed-jihadists-kurdish-pyd>.

³⁰ “Putin Declares ‘Complete Victory’ on Both Banks of Euphrates in Syria,” *Reuters*, December 6, 2017, accessed January 23, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideastcrisis-syria-putin/putin-declares-complete-victory-on-both-banks-of-euphrates-in-syria-idUSKBN1E027>.

³¹ “Rebels in Southern Syria Reach Deal to End Violence,” *Al Jazeera*, July 7, 2018, accessed August 20, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/rebels-southern-syria-reach-ceasefire-deal-russia-180706130719825.html>.

³² “Rusya ile Suriye Mutabakatı,” *CNN Türk*, October 22, 2019, accessed October 23, 2019, <https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/rusya-ile-suriye-mutabakati-iste-10-maddelik-anlasma>.

between the Assad forces and opposition groups continues for the sake of controlling several towns in northern Syria.

4. Peace Negotiations

Peace efforts have been initiated by the regional and global actors since the beginning of the conflict. Five peace initiatives are significant since they brought conflicting parties or their representatives together and recommended conditions to build peace. The AL produced a plan to stop violence and stabilise the country. The UN Plans were initiated by Special Envoys for Syria after the escalation of the conflict. The Geneva, Vienna and Astana talks brought high representatives of the states in the region and great powers together and aimed to force the Syrian government and opposition groups to establish a negotiated settlement through diplomacy. This section analyses the influence of these efforts towards ending the civil war.

4.1. The Arab League Plan

The AL's peace attempt was the first initiative to end the civil war which consisted of two attempts. The first attempt was initiated on November 2, 2011. The AL was successful in bringing the Assad regime and the Syrian National Council (SNC), the representative of the rebel groups, together at the negotiating table. After a series of meetings, the Syrian government agreed to the AL Peace Plan. The plan had five major points: The Syrian army accepted to halt its operations and violence against protesters, the access of the AL and international media channels in Syria was granted, the government agreed to release prisoners who have recently been detained, both sides of the conflict decided to start a dialogue in two weeks, and the government accepted to withdraw military equipment, heavy weapons and tanks from the cities.³³

Despite the agreement, the opposition groups had concerns about Syria's implementation of the agreed plan. Samir Nashar, who headed the

³³ "UN Envoy Calls for Transitional Government in Syria." *BBC*, June 30, 2012, accessed November 26, 2013. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18650775>.

opposition group's negotiations with the AL, confirmed this scepticism by saying that they informed the AL's Secretary-General of their concerns implying the Assad government's insufficient credibility to accomplish the agreed points, which had become evident through the recent attacks of Homs.³⁴

While the Syrian government accepted the plan on October 30, 2011, it did not trust the mediation of AL Secretary-General al-Arabi by claiming that the initiative was used as Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's proxy effort.³⁵ The Arab-brokered peace deal was broken by the Syrian government just with four days as the Syrian army killed twenty-three demonstrators. Then the AL suspended Syria's membership on November 12, 2011. Qatar's Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim announced that further political and economic sanctions would be introduced if violence persisted. He also told that they had hope for a confident action to end the war and start an open communication channel for a peaceful resolution.³⁶

After the first deal was broken, the AL organised another peace talk in December 2011. These meetings also hosted both the Syrian government and representatives of Syrian opposition parties and resulted in a deal on a few aspects: The Syrian government and opposition forces guaranteed the withdrawal of their forces from the streets and started a peace process between the two sides. In addition, the Syrian government accepted that peaceful protesters would be released, and the AL would send a monitoring group to Syria.³⁷ This meant that after a one-and-a-half month later, almost the same deal was applied again. Arguably, it could be said that the outcome of the new talk was 'duplication' of the first AL Plan. Besides, the lack of development demonstrated that the Syrian government was reluctant to end violence.

The Monitoring Mission Group (MMG) operated between December 24, 2011, and January 18, 2012. The observers of the MMG were divided into fifteen zones who observed the situation in twenty different cities. The

³⁴ "Syria 'Violence Defies Peace Deal'," *Al Jazeera*, November 4, 2011, accessed December 4, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/11/201111381935847935.html>.

³⁵ Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria," 275.

³⁶ "Arab League to Suspend Syria from Meetings," *Fox News*, November 12, 2011, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/arab-league-to-suspend-syria-from-meetings>.

³⁷ Müjge Küçükkeleş, "Arab League's Syrian Policy," *SETA Policy Brief*, No: 56, (2012): 11.

MMG detected various human rights violations. The report of the MMG proves these violations:

*In Homs, Idlib and Hama, the Observer Mission witnessed acts of violence being committed against Government forces and civilians that resulted in several deaths and injuries. Examples of those acts include the bombing of a civilian bus, killing eight persons and injuring others, including women and children, and the bombing of a train carrying diesel oil. In another incident in Homs, a police bus was blown up, killing two police officers. A fuel pipeline and some small bridges were also bombed.*³⁸

The report also illustrated that the MMG was unsuccessful due to insufficient equipment, the Syrian government's attempts to limit the group's ability to travel and the conflict of ideas among member states with regards to its mission.³⁹ Thus, the AL peace plans did not end violence and Saudi Arabia withdrew its members of the monitoring committee from Syria and called Russia, China and the regional powers to push the Assad administration for respecting the AL plan. As a result of the lack of success, the AL ended its monitoring mission on January 28, 2012. Hence, the first peacemaking attempt failed without any improvement.

4.2. The UN Plans

The UN organised several peace events to end the civil war in Syria. These events were set up by UN Special Envoys for Syria. Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi organised peace meetings and developed plans on behalf of the UN. The first attempt was initiated by Kofi Annan. The negotiations were organised through the UN Security Council (UNSC) in January and February 2012. The permanent members of the UNSC voted a draft resolution plan to stop the war in Syria. While the US, UK and France aimed to apply the AL plan, Russia and China were against to put pressure on the Syrian government. As a result, Russia and China vetoed the resolution plan and the conflict escalated.⁴⁰ The important thing about Annan's mediation was that he talked to the Assad regime and opposition

³⁸ "Report of the Head of the League of Arab States Observer Mission to Syria for the period from 24 December 2011 to 18 January 2012," *Arab League*, Report No: 259.12D (2012).

³⁹ "Report of the Head of the League," *Arab League*, 6-7.

⁴⁰ Lundgren, "Mediation in Syria," 275-276.

groups to establish long-standing peace. He also met regional actors, namely Turkey, Egypt and Qatar to create a coalition on how to end the conflict. He also met with Assad in Damascus in 2012. In the end, he proposed a six-point plan:

Commit to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process; commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations-supervised cessation of armed violence; ensure timely provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting; intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons, including especially vulnerable categories of persons; ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists, and; respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully.⁴¹

After long discussions, a ceasefire was declared in April 2012. The UN sent 300 soldiers to guarantee to proceed with the ceasefire. Nevertheless, both the Assad regime and opposition groups reignited violence and the UN monitoring mission ended in June 2012.⁴² Annan's six-point plan was not implemented due to several reasons: the Syrian government refused to implement the plan, the UNSC did not have a consensus, and both the Syrian army and rebel groups escalated the war. Because of the failure of the plan, Annan resigned on August 2, 2012.

After Annan's withdrawal, the UN appointed Lakhdar Brahimi as chief UN mediator, who is a senior Algerian diplomat with experience in Afghanistan, Lebanon and several other conflicts. In line with Annan, Brahimi acted as a mediator between the Syrian government and rebel groups. He worked for a ceasefire in Syria during Eid al-Adha, a major religious celebration for Muslims. Despite Brahimi's great efforts and agreement of the conflicting sides, the deal on ceasefire did not work as both sides blamed each other for the continued violence.⁴³ He stated that forming a foreign circle was necessary for initiating peace efforts:

⁴¹ "Text of Annan's Six-Point Peace Plan for Syria," *Reuters*, April 4, 2012, accessed January 1, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-ceasefire/text-of-annans-six-point-peace-plan-for-syria-idUSBRE8330HJ20120404>.

⁴² UNSCR, *Resolution 2042: Adopted by the Security Council at its 6751st meeting, on 14 April 2012*, S/RES/2042 (2012); UNSCR, *Resolution 2043: Adopted by the Security Council at its 6756th meeting, on 21 April 2012*, S/RES/2043 (2012).

⁴³ Lakhdar Brahimi, "Syria, A Civil, Sectarian and Proxy War," *Elders*, August 22, 2012, accessed May 8, 2018, <https://theelders.org/news/syria-civil-sectarian-and-proxy-war>.

Only what I call “the outer circle” could perhaps offer the opening needed to start something constructive. The Secretary-General and Kofi (Annan) were very much aware of that even before I arrived on the scene. At the centre of that outer circle is naturally the Security Council. At the centre of the Council is the P5 Group of Permanent Members and the work I initiated with Russia and the United States aimed at promoting unity among Council members, a crucial factor that has so far eluded us.⁴⁴

He applied a more consultative approach and tried to convince parties against destructive results of conflicting parties. He, therefore, underlined that it was a ripe moment for resolution to all conflicting parties.⁴⁵ However, his reconciliation attempts did not avail.

4.3. The Geneva Conferences

The Geneva Conferences are a series of meetings between the Syrian government, opposition parties and several regional and global actors. The conferences were organised between 2012 and 2017, and consisted of four series of events.

The first Geneva Conference was initiated by Kofi Annan on June 20, 2012. The conference hosted the US, UK, Russia, China, Turkey, France, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and EU representatives.⁴⁶ Particularly, the attendance of influential people, namely, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, British Foreign Secretary Hague, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, a representative of China, and Annan demonstrated the importance of the meeting. At the end of the conference, Annan announced that the participants agreed on the requirement of a transitional government body which would have strong executive powers and include people from both the Syrian regime and the opposition.⁴⁷

Any political settlement must deliver to the people of Syria a transition that offers a perspective for the future that can be shared by all in Syria; establishes clear steps according to a firm timetable towards the realisation of that perspective; can be implemented in a climate of safety

⁴⁴ Brahimi, “Syria, A Civil, Sectarian and Proxy War.”

⁴⁵ Pruitt, “Ripeness Theory,” 240-247.

⁴⁶ Action Group for Syria, *Final Communique*, Arab League, June 30, 2012.

⁴⁷ “UN envoy calls for transitional government,” *BBC*.

*for all, stability and calm; is reached rapidly without further bloodshed and violence and is credible.*⁴⁸

However, these principles did not bring the civil war to an end. Instead of a political transition, the level of violence rapidly increased and a political resolution became more difficult. Two years later, the second Geneva Conference was held on January 22-31, 2014. This time, the conference was initiated by Annan's successor Lakhdar Brahimi. Unlike the UN peace plans, this event was dominated by global powers. The main goal of the conference was to bring the Syrian government and opposition parties together to discuss the implementation of the Final Communiqué, therefore to discuss conditions for a transitional government.

In terms of the insight of the conference, it started with the question of Assad's future. US Secretary of State John Kerry insisted on the first day of the conference that Assad should not be involved in transitional governments: "There is no way, no way possible, that a man who has led a brutal response to his own people can regain the legitimacy to govern."⁴⁹ The conference did not bring an outcome with regards to conditions or perspectives of peace. Brahimi said at the conference:

*It is not good for Syria that we come back for another round and fall in the same trap that we have been struggling with this week and most of the first round. So I think it is better that every side goes back and reflect and take their responsibility: Do they want this process to take place or not? I will do the same.*⁵⁰

The second Geneva Conference was unsuccessful also because the Syrian government and opposition groups blamed each other. On the one hand, the government added all opposition forces and even civilians, who were at the negotiating table in Geneva, to the list of terrorist groups. On the other hand, opposition groups blamed the government for reluctance for a transitional government.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "Factbox - What They Said on Syria at Montreux," *Reuters*, January 22, 2014, accessed June 4, 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-talks-quotes/factbox-what-they-said-on-syria-at-montreux-idUKBREA0L1JI20140122>.

⁵⁰ Anne Barnard and Nick Cumming-Bruce, "After Second Round of Syria Talks, No Agreement Even on How to Negotiate," *New York Times*, February 16, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/world/middleeast/after-second-round-of-syria-talks-no-agreement-even-on-how-to-negotiate.html>.

⁵¹ Anne Barnard and Nick Cumming-Bruce, "After Second Round of Syria Talks,"

The third Geneva Conference was organised in January 2016. Again, the UN organised this conference between the Syrian government and opposition forces. However, the beginning of the conference witnessed a room crisis as the Syrian government and opposition groups did not want to sit in the same room. Short after its initiation, the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura announced that he suspended the negotiations with no outcome.⁵² Both sides blamed each other at the end of the conference. For example, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov blamed the opposition: “The opposition took a completely unconstructive position and tried to put forward preconditions.”⁵³ In contrast, commanders of opposition forces stated that they had hope for peace. Nevertheless, the failure of the negotiations would convince their international supporters “including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, that it was time to send them more powerful and advanced weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles.”⁵⁴

The fourth series of Geneva Talks was organised between February 23 and March 13, 2017. The conference was again organised under the supervision of the UN and between the Syrian government and opposition. While the Assad administration was represented by Syria’s UN ambassador, Bashar Jaafari, the opposition forces were represented by the High Negotiation Committee. The talks ended with no concrete outcome due to different expectations. Whilst the opposition forces aimed to reach a political transition, the Syrian government prioritised the counter-terrorism issue in the country. The fourth Geneva Conference did not bring any contribution to peace. It only set an agenda for peace and helped form the foundations of the Astana talks.

4.4. The Vienna Peace Talks

The Vienna Process was another main peace attempt which was initiated on October 23, 2015 and consisted of two rounds of meetings. This was one of

⁵² “Syria Conflict: Ceasefire Agreed, Backed by Russia and Turkey,” *BBC World News*, December 29, 2016, accessed December 29, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38460127>.

⁵³ “Syria Crisis Plan: Cessation of Hostilities, Humanitarian Airdrops, Peace Talks Laid Out in Munich,” *Russia Today*, February 12, 2016, accessed February 19, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/332211-munich-lavrov-kerry-un-syria>.

⁵⁴ “Backed by Russian Jets Syrian Army Closes in on Aleppo,” *Huffington Post*, February 4, 2016, accessed February 24, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/backed-by-russian-jets-syrian-army-closes-in-on-aleppo_us_56b37778e4b08069c7a63e09.

the biggest peace talks through the participation of the Foreign Ministers of the US, Turkey, Russia and Saudi Arabia. The diplomatic efforts of these members, called the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), helped discuss the future of Syria. The first round of the peace talks hosted twenty countries including the US, UK, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, France, Italy and Germany. At the end of the conference, these countries called the Assad regime and opposition groups to start negotiations immediately. The second series of the peace talks were organised in mid-November. The conference organisers declared that the Syrian government and opposition groups should immediately start political talks which will be held under the supervision of the UN starting possibly on January 1, 2016.⁵⁵

After the meeting of anti-government groups including Ahrar al-Sham in Saudi Arabia on December 10, 2015, the groups delivered a declaration about the principles of peace talks with the Assad administration. Assad replied that he would not negotiate with ‘foreign terrorists’ which caused the failure of the Vienna Talks.⁵⁶

The UNSC unanimously passed the Resolution 2254 endorsing the ISSG’s plan for a transitional body, which sets a timetable for official negotiations for a unity government in six months. The UNSC put forward the demands for the route of peacemaking in Syria:

*Demands that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment, welcomes the commitment by the ISSG to press the parties in this regard, and further demands that all parties immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable.*⁵⁷

This resolution demonstrated that the UNSC aimed first to achieve a ceasefire and reduce the level of violence, then to organise multilateral negotiations to establish the post-conflict political environment in Syria. However, it

⁵⁵ “UN Chief Takes Aim at Russia over Syria Military Build-Up,” *Middle East Eye*, July 11, 2017, accessed July 30, 2015, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/un-chief-takes-aim-russia-over-syria-military-buildup>.

⁵⁶ “Syria Conflict: Powers Backing Rivals Meet in Vienna,” *BBC World Service*, October 30, 2015, accessed November 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p035yyfl>.

⁵⁷ UNSCR, *Resolution 2254: Adopted by the Security Council at its 7588th meeting, on 18 December 2015*, S/RES/2254 (2015); italics in original.

did not end the conflict between the warring parties as opposition groups could not agree on who would represent the Syrian opposition.

Furthermore, Obama said that the Vienna Talks were not able to “foresee a situation in which we can end the civil war in Syria while Assad remains in power”.⁵⁸ This was a signal calling Russia and Iran to stop their support for Assad. One day later, the UN Security Council met to discuss a humanitarian intervention. Nevertheless, Chapter 7, which was enabling specific legal authorisation in order to use UN force to stop the war in Syria, failed to be taken in action.⁵⁹

4.5. The Astana Talks

While the second Geneva Conference was not successful in establishing the conditions of peace, opposition forces in Syria organised another peace conference in 2015. The Astana talks consisted of a preliminary meeting and nine rounds of negotiations. The preliminary meeting formed the foundations of the negotiations. The meeting brought together several opposition groups of Syria on May 25-27, 2015 in Astana, Kazakhstan. The Syrian government refused to attend the conference. The conference series continued on October 2-4 with the participation of opposition groups. At the conference, participants agreed to call a general election in 2016 under the control of the international society. The opposition groups asked the host of the conference, President Nursultan Nazarbayev, to act as a mediator in the Syrian civil war.⁶⁰

The first Astana talk was suggested by the Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdoğan. This time, it was not an opposition conference but a coalition meeting between the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia and Iran on December 20, 2016. Eight days after the beginning of the

⁵⁸ Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada after Bilateral Meeting,” *The U.S. White House*, November 19, 2015, accessed November 20, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/19/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-trudeau-canada-after>.

⁵⁹ UNSCR, *Resolution 2254*.

⁶⁰ “Syrian Opposition Meeting in Astana Makes Tentative Headway in Finding Way forward for Peace Process,” *Astana Times*, May 29, 2015, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://astanatimes.com/2015/05/syrian-opposition-meeting-in-astana-makes-tentative-headway-in-finding-way-forward-for-peace-process>.

conference, Turkey and Russia agreed on a ceasefire in whole Syria as of December 30, 2016. As Turkey objected, the Syrian Democratic Council which represented the Syrian Democratic Forces dominated by the YPG was not invited to the peace initiatives. Likewise, ISIS, al-Nusra Front and the YPG were excluded from the ceasefire agreement. The conference was named the “International Meeting on Syrian Settlement.” While the Syrian government was represented by Bashar Jaafari, the opposition groups were represented by the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) which was formed by moderate groups in Syria. The conference was defined as the ‘Astanaisation’ of the Geneva Talks by Hassan Hassan due to a shift toward the Syrian opposition conducting army operations and away from Syrians with solely political impact. The talks again started on January 23-24 aiming at supporting the UNSC Resolution 2254.⁶¹

Russia’s suggestion was significant in terms of the discussions at the conference, as Russian officials offered a draft paper for the future of Syria, changing from the Syrian Arab Republic to the Republic of Syria. This offer included decentralising authorities and the legislative of federalism, which would strengthen the Parliament as opposed to the presidency and adopts secularism by abolishing Islamic law. The conference ended with an agreement between Turkey, Russia and Iran on setting a monitoring commission to enforce this resolution ceasefire.⁶² It was a ripe moment for establishing the foundations of an agreement because the civil war claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and both the Syrian government and opposition forces believed that they were unable to eliminate their enemies through armed struggle. Turkey’s and Iran’s pressure as regional powers and Russia’s role as the representative of the Syrian government increased the reliability of these talks.

The next two rounds aimed to establish confidence-building measures for opposition forces. The document, to set the conditions of joint operational group of Turkey, Russia and Iran, was checked during the two-day meeting.⁶³ The fourth round brought about a clear outcome. The talks between Iran,

⁶¹ UNSCR, *Resolution 2254*.

⁶² “Sponsors of Syria Talks in Astana Strike Deal to Protect Fragile Ceasefire,” *Guardian*, January 24, 2017, accessed January 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/24/syria-talks-astana-russia-turkey-iran-ceasefire>.

⁶³ “Latest Syrian Peace Talks in Astana Focus on Humanitarian Issues,” *Astana Times*, November 2, 2017, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/11/latest-syrian-peace-talks-in-astana-focus-on-humanitarian-issues>.

Russia and Turkey led to an agreement to establish four de-escalation zones, consisting of Idlib and rebel-controlled Ghouta, Homs and the Syrian-Jordan border. The operations were agreed to be stopped as of May 6, 2017, which would enable humanitarian aid and the return of civilians to their hometowns.⁶⁴ This round, therefore, aimed to achieve prospects for peace at least by establishing a safe zone for civilians. The fifth round of the Astana talks was organised on July 12-15, 2017. Again, the talks were supported by UN Special Envoy de Mistura who argued that this initiative facilitated the reduction of violence.⁶⁵ As several groups boycotted the conference, such as the Southern Front and Quneitra Offensive, the only minor ceasefire was declared at the end of the conference.

The following attempt hosted Russia, Turkey and Iran, at which northern governorate of Idlib was also declared a de-escalation zone.⁶⁶ The seventh round of the talks addressed the exchange of detainees to reduce the level of tension. The three guarantor states repeated a political solution under the UNSC Resolution 2254.⁶⁷ The eighth round of the talks focused on the humanitarian crisis in Eastern Ghouta of Damascus. The conflict in Eastern Ghouta was aimed to be resolved through political efforts at the next resolution initiative. The ninth talks were organised on March 16, 2018, but did not bring an outcome for resolution of the conflict.⁶⁸

5. The 'Inevitable' Failure?

The war in Syria is one of the most devastating conflicts of our time. International negotiation and mediation attempts were organised by the

⁶⁴ "Russia, Turkey and Iran Continue Cooperation on De-escalation Zones in Syria," TASS, June 23, 2017, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://tass.com/world/953004>.

⁶⁵ "Note to Correspondents: Transcript of the Press Conference by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Stefan de Mistura," *The United Nations*, July 5, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2017-07-05/note-correspondents-transcript-press-conference-un-special>.

⁶⁶ "6th Astana Process Talks Produce De-escalation Zone Agreement," *Astana Calling*, September 27, 2017, accessed November 11, 2017, <https://www.astanacalling.com/6th-astana-process-talks-produce-de-escalation-zone-agreement>.

⁶⁷ "Latest Syrian Peace Talks," *Astana Times*.

⁶⁸ "Ninth Round of Astana-Hosted Syria Talks to Take Place after Syria Truce Guarantor Countries, FMs in Astana – Kazakh Foreign Ministry," *Interfax*, February 13, 2018, accessed March 3, 2018, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?pg=5&id=810002>.

UN, UNSC, and regional and global powers of the world. Each peace initiative had different characteristics with regards to actors, demands, insights and outcomes towards ending the civil war in Syria.

In terms of actors, all major peace attempts had different characteristics. While the AL peace plan was a regional effort, the Geneva, Vienna and Astana talks were international peace conferences. The international negotiations literature suggests that a peacemaking effort can only be successful if all conflicting parties sit at the negotiation table.⁶⁹ Although each attempt witnessed the Syrian government's claim that they did not negotiate with terrorists, opposition groups were represented at these talks. However, the AL's peace plan was criticised due to Saudi Arabia's attendance at the peace talks because it was viewed as the rival of Syria in the Middle East.

Furthermore, the Geneva conferences and the Vienna peace talks hosted more countries than any other event. Both efforts hosted supporters (Russia and China) and opponents (US, UK, Turkey and other western countries) of the Assad administration, which increased in the possibility of their success. The interest of the international society in the civil war was an important facilitator for hosting disputing sides at the peace talks, but these events were not multilateral negotiations. However, the Astana talks involved only Russia, Turkey, Iran, as well as the Syrian government and opposition groups. It can be said that the influence of peace efforts did not directly depend on actors who participated in these events since the Astana talks did not host western countries.

In terms of the demands for peace, the first aim of all events was to bring violence to an end. The other demands of these events were differing: First, the AL's peace plan suggested establishing a mission group to monitor the situation in Syria. Second, the Geneva conferences aimed to establish a transitional government body and enforce this change to the Syrian government. Third, the Vienna peace talks aimed to persuade the Syrian government and opposition groups for a negotiated settlement. Last, the Astana talks had an objective to close the gap between the Assad regime and rebel groups and create safe zones for civilians. Furthermore, the balance of power in the Middle East also affected the demands of global

⁶⁹ Hancock, "The Northern Irish peace process," 214.

powers. On the one hand, Putin's goal was to keep Assad in power as Russia believed that Syria should have been politically under the control of Russia. On the other hand, the western countries insisted on Assad's removal for sustainable peace in Syria. These power balances were witnessed in almost all peace initiatives despite the participation of Western countries (the US, UK, France and Turkey) and Eastern countries (Russia and Iran) in many peace attempts. It can be said that these power relations are reasons for the inevitable failure of these peace events.

In terms of the insights and outcomes, the AL peace plan was organised before the start of the proxy warfare campaign when the level of violence was relatively low. However, there was a trust issue on the Assad government's side. As Assad thought that the monitoring group was a proxy initiative of Saudi Arabia, he did not support the activities of the group. This led to the failure of the monitoring mission's goal to maintain the ceasefire in several different towns. Particularly, the lack of trust between Assad and the monitoring group prevented a successful outcome. The reason for the trust issue was the Assad regime's accusation that the monitoring group acted as a proxy for Saudi Arabia and thus was not neutral. The Geneva conferences again were used to force Assad to resign and discuss the post-conflict system for Syria rather than to establish a suitable environment for multilateral negotiations. Particularly, the first two conferences envisaged a transitional government but the negotiations ended with no result. The other two conferences witnessed discussions on different demands. While the opposition forces aimed to achieve a political transition, the Syrian government focused on counter-terrorism in the country. The difference between the goals of parties prevented progress.

The insight of the Vienna peace talks clearly demonstrated that they were not official negotiations. Instead, they were organised as pre-negotiation attempts of official negotiations between the Assad administration and opposition. The Vienna talks were a facilitator for initiating negotiations between the Assad regime and opposition forces. The talks provided a suitable environment for discussion and close the gap between conflicting parties for building peace. Therefore, at the end of each conference, the leaders of twenty states called on both sides to come to the negotiation table. It could be concluded that all countries attending these talks aimed to act as mediators. The third-party consultation, however, is only possible

through the consent of conflicting sides. The legitimacy and representation of the participants in the talks were in question since the beginning of the conflict that resulted in the failure of this event.

The Astana talks were more successful as four de-escalation zones were declared for civilians during the conference.⁷⁰ However, the Syrian government was still refusing to negotiate with its enemies. When the level of violence rapidly increased and both sides lost numerous militants, these moments were not viewed as ripe moments for resolution by both sides. The Syrian government did not have the intention to resolve the conflict in a non-violent way which was another reason for the inevitable failure of the peace attempts. While the government declared that opposition groups were either national or foreign terrorists, opposition forces aimed to make sure the ending of the Assad regime and re-establishing Syria. Later, talks at Astana hosted Iranian, Russian and Turkish presidents which strengthened the reliability of the talks as three important powers of the region aimed to resolve the conflict. The outcome of these talks is arguably related to their timing. After several years of the high-intensity conflict, all conflicting parties started to think that the conflict could only be ended through political efforts.

Considering the actors, demands of parties, insights and outcomes of the civil war, the article has found that despite acting as mediators, none of the countries who organised or attended peace talks were mediators. Instead, they acted as facilitators to bring conflicting parties together. The only mediation activities were organised by UN Special Envoys Annan and de Mistura. Although they did not bring about an outcome for the resolution of the conflict, they helped de-escalate the conflict temporarily through short-term ceasefires. While the conflict rapidly deteriorated through the deadly attacks of ISIS, YPG and other groups as well as the Syrian regime, the reluctance of regional and global powers to fully cooperate prevented political resolution.

6. Conclusion

The article has argued that the peace efforts in Syria have begun shortly after the start of the civil war. It has revealed that these talks were only pre-

⁷⁰ "Russia, Turkey and Iran," *TASS*.

negotiation attempts, but not official negotiations. A negotiation process should not only bring the conflicting parties together, but should also provide them with a suitable environment to discuss their demands and requirements. None of these events provided this environment. Instead, the states, some of which were neither geographically nor politically bounded by the conflict, forced warring parties to a political resolution whose conditions were not discussed or determined by conflicting parties.

The article has found that it has been very difficult for regional and global powers to be neutral mediators as they are either directly or indirectly involved in the civil war. The neutrality of these countries has always been in question. Even though political resolution attempts were initiated by western or eastern countries, their reluctance to put pressure on the Syrian government prevented a political solution. While there was a consensus between the western countries that Assad must leave, the eastern countries aimed to keep Assad in charge which would secure their control in the region. The proxy warfare in Syria also prevented a peace agreement as each state supported different sub-state armed groups through financial, medical and military support as well as training. Most international peace talks witnessed these developments, but international society lacked cooperation to stop violence in Syria.

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