

Event Report

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

Syria after the Russian Intervention: in Search of a political Strategy to End the Crisis¹

From the beginning the crisis in Syria has been extremely complex and full of dilemmas for the international community, in particular the European countries and the European Union. The Syrian refugee crisis reminds the EU and its Member States how close Syria actually is and how many Syrians expect Europe to play a role, if not in finding a political solution then at least in guaranteeing their security. The rise of ISIS last year and the Russian involvement in Syria in the last months, not only added further to the complexity, but also to the urgency for the EU and its Member States to act.

One key question for the role of the international community and in particular Europe is how to deal with the regime of President Assad. While the EU earlier recognised the Syrian Opposition Coalition as legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and several European governments expressed that ‘Assad should go’, some other Member States maintained diplomatic relations with the Assad regime. With the war against ISIS, in which almost all EU Member States are involved, and the Russian intervention in Syria, the debate on Assad’s future is changing. More and more European governments and international actors have expressed the necessity of cooperation with the Assad regime in order to fight ISIS and ensure a transition to a post-conflict scenario. At the same time the Russian airstrikes are strengthening Assad’s hold on the country at the expense of moderate rebel groups. The question on the future of Assad also divides opposition and civil society. Against this backdrop, Europe needs a joint approach on Syria and a more strategic debate on potential Syrian partners for a solution of the conflict.

PAX and the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung have been directly involved with Syrian activists and civil opposition since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in [2011](#). What are the different options for a political strategy with or without Assad and what are the consequences for EU policies?

A recent development in the Syrian civil war is that almost all fighting parties have declared the Islamic state as a common enemy. After the international coalition with the US and its military allies had launched an air strike campaign, the Russians have recently deployed their air force as well. At the latest this Russian intervention has changed the Syrian conflict from an escalating Syrian civil war into a full-fledged international conflict. But even if the temporary alliance between the US and Russia were to be successful in ending the violence, the question remains what the future Syrian state should look like.

The Russian involvement

Even though the Russian intervention has only lasted a month, it has already changed the situation in Syria dramatically. Contrary to its official aim to push back IS Russia has rather been targeting rebel positions, which in the case of rural Aleppo has actually led to IS taking over

¹ The event took place on 17 November 2015. Guest speakers were: **Haid Haid**, programme manager, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Middle East, Beirut; **Kristin Helberg**, political scientist, journalist und Syria expert, Berlin; **Samir Aita**, member of the Syrian Democratic Forum, President of the Cercle des Economistes Arabes and former editor-in-chief of Le Monde Diplomatique Arabic edition and **Nadim Karkutli**, head of cooperation section, Manager of the EU Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis, European External Action Service. The event was moderated by **Annette Riedel**, Deutschlandradio. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

formerly rebel-held territories. From this the conclusion could be drawn that, contrary to the official aim, the idea underlying the Russian intervention is to strengthen Bashar Al-Assad's shaky position. At the same time, Russia has sought to play a role as an indispensable party in the process of finding a solution for the Syrian conflict. Putin's plan to achieve a quick victory that could be used to divert the attention of the Russian public from the relative failure in Ukraine did not work out as the first Russian air raid – on Hama – was not a success. In an effort to compensate for that, air raids on Aleppo were carried out, in which the Russian bombs served to support Iranian troops on the ground. These Russian attacks hit many civilian targets, such as market squares or hospitals, which has caused yet another wave of people fleeing their homes in search of shelter. In its role as a negotiating partner, Russia has combined talk of cooperation with unilateral action, for instance the bombing of the town of Duma, which coincided with the first days of the Vienna talks. Yet, while so far only paying lip service to fighting IS, Russia has already been targeted by the terrorists for that venture when they brought down the Kogalymavia A231 over the Sinai Peninsula on 31 October leaving 224 people dead.

On the diplomatic front, it would not even require additional efforts to have Russia commit to taking a more constructive role in the conflict, since it has helped pass several UN Security Council resolutions which, once implemented, could bring about real progress. These resolutions which were put in place years ago call upon the parties involved and especially the Assad regime to stop the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons immediately. Up until now, however, neither Russia nor its ally Iran has shown their resolve to force Assad to end the use of those weapons, nor did they contribute to the de-escalation of the conflict in any other way.

Other measures agreed in the UN resolutions were the provision of humanitarian access to war zones as well as the release of arbitrarily detained persons. It would, hence, not even require any progress in Vienna to define steps that Russia could take in order to play a more constructive role in the peace process and to show that it is serious about its commitment in fighting IS.

A fresh start for diplomacy?

Regardless of the intensified Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict the Vienna talks have opened a door to good old diplomacy and provide a platform where Western powers, Russia and Middle Eastern states can negotiate and coordinate. While many issues are still very contentious, one enemy that has united all negotiating parties is IS. In addition to the air strikes conducted by the US-led international coalition and the Russian promise to actually start bombing IS after the downing of their plane, France, still under shock after the terrorist attacks in Paris of 13 November, is likely to increase its own commitment to combat IS. Since it has invoked Article 42.7 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, the so-called solidarity clause, the EU as a whole will have to match that rhetoric and play a more active role in finding a solution.

However, even though all parties in the negotiations are determined to pacify Syria and to defeat IS, whether the Vienna talks will actually contribute to end the fighting in Syrian and facilitate a political transition remains unclear. Agreements with Russia and Iran which aim at implementing a ceasefire can be a helpful first step, but even their influence in the conflict is limited. Those two powers could exert influence on the Assad regime, but IS and the Al-Nusra Front are out of reach for them as well, which makes an overall ceasefire very unlikely. And even if a political transition process were to take place and negotiations about the future of the country could be started, the camps remain deeply divided regarding the future of the Assad regime. On the one hand, Russia and Iran want to keep their puppet Assad in power and they consider any opposition against the regime as terrorism. According to them, there is only a dichotomous choice between Assad and IS ruling the country and they stand with Assad who, in

their eyes, is the legitimate president. As it is obvious to them too that Assad's forces are too weak to be able to defeat IS, the logical consequence is to join forces with the regime in order to reinstall its power.

Most Western governments and the Syrian opposition agree that there cannot be a future for Assad as president of Syria who has used barrel bombs against his own people and waged a 4-year civil war with over 200 000 casualties in order to hold on to power. Hence, for the West and the opposition the question is not *if*, but *when* Assad is going to step down and a transition is going to take place.

It is clear that the future of the Assad regime has shifted from being a matter of national concern to becoming a geopolitical bone of contention that goes far beyond the Syrian borders. In the case of the civil war in Ukraine, negotiations with the sponsor state have helped to terminate the fighting. Time will show whether this is also possible in the case of Syria.

A question of legitimacy

Even with the Vienna talks going on, the fighting and killing on the ground continues incessantly. People in Syria are being killed or forced to flee irrespective of what is being negotiated in Vienna. At the moment Syria is relentlessly being destroyed because it functions as a battlefield between outside powers which seem to care next to nothing about the fate of the people living there.

Consequently, the implementation of a truce should have the highest priority before any substantive talks on the future of the country can take place. Creating a peaceful situation is not only necessary as of itself, but also crucial for the people of Syria to be able to organise their representation in future peace talks. As it is impossible for real democratic deliberation to take place as long as the threat of being killed is eminent, the imposition of any kind of ceasefire by the Vienna talks would at least help to build trust among the Syrian population in the international cooperation. It speaks for itself that any solution for Syria has to be negotiated not only by the global powers that have a stake in the conflict, but primarily by the Syrians themselves. But who shall represent the Syrian people?

This question is difficult to answer, since even among the opposition there are several camps with diverging interests. One group that has received international recognition is the so-called Free Syrian Army, which is controlling some territory. Second, the moderate secular opposition might be a candidate, but as of now, it seems that it is financially weaker than the religious forces that are propped up by Saudi-Arabia and Qatar or Iran. Finally, the exile government is sure to play a role, but at the moment they are barred from entering the country.

In the end, the main interest of the Syrian people is neither to return to the rule of Assad, where an Alawite minority suppressed the Sunni majority and other religious and secular parts of the population, nor do they want the Islamic State to terrorise them. Any compromise to be reached should aim to incorporate the ethnic and religious diversity of the country. The opposition that is organised in local councils and communities should be called upon to form a credible and representative faction that can truly represent the wishes and needs of the people.

EU as a third way

In finding a way out of the current conflict, the European Union can play an important role even if its military capacities are limited. As can be seen in Vienna, it can bring together the parties involved in the conflict. What is more the EU is still highly regarded among the Syrian population because it represents stability and safety for those who flee the country and is respected as an international actor. With the current state of the Vienna talks being that the peace process should be a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition, it is clear that the role for the EU should be the one of a moderator and facilitator between the factions rather than that of a negotiating party.

Accordingly, the EU's interests should lie in achieving the goals for which it has the capacities. It can provide both financial assistance and training for representatives of the Syrian people, supervise and monitor possible elections and insist on the implementation of international agreements. This way it could ensure that the disintegration of Syria is brought to a halt and that the country can be stable and peaceful in the future without getting too directly involved in the great power game. Finally, the EU can support the fight against IS on the domestic front. What needs to be done is not only to help defeat IS militarily but also to win the ideological battle and prevent radicalisation by better integrating immigrants and refugees in the European societies and encouraging Muslim communities to play an active role in countering IS propaganda. Of course, this means that the EU can only play a limited role in the resolution of the conflict. The fighting can solely be ended if Russia and Iran stop propping up Assad's regime and attacking the moderate rebel forces. Before a ceasefire is in place, the opposition cannot be expected to enter any negotiations for a power handover, and a victory over IS is still far out of sight. But if the EU fulfils the role of a trusted and reliable neutral partner, it can at least facilitate the finding of a compromise that paves the way towards this final goal.