



In most of these agreements, there are three main sides: government representatives,<sup>3</sup> opposition representatives and facilitators. From place to place, these representatives change, but it seems that there is a general pattern of action which involves, though not exclusively, these three types of actors. The case studies also show that these ceasefires are generally achieved after a long devastating siege imposed by regime forces who do not merely shell the place but also cut off food and medical supplies. This explains why most of the opposition actors see government's strategy as starvation-until-surrender rather than as a ceasefire or an agreement.

Another common pattern across these ceasefire cases is the weak position of the opposition and government's tendency to use these agreements as a means to achieve military gains. This tendency may be partly due to the considerable involvement of the Syrian military, security forces and National Defence Force (NDF) in the negotiations who, arguably, seek a military solution to the problem. It is also a reflection of the balance of power on the ground; the regime's forces often have superiority in military, political and economic aspects and therefore they seek a win-lose outcome.

Not all ceasefire cases are humiliating, however. The truce in Barzeh is a prime example that was close to being a win-win example for several reasons, including the strategic location of the town, the effectiveness of the armed opposition, and the pressure on the NDF, which usually plays a spoiler's role<sup>4</sup>. Even though the terms of the ceasefires were not fully respected after the agreement, the humanitarian situation became relatively better. This indicates that the government would accept a win-win scenario as an outcome and cede some points if the opposition had a relatively strong negotiating position, which is not the case with most other examples.

In the next section, I illustrate how important it is for the Syrian government to change its strategy and how the idea of local ceasefires is a good opportunity to start resolving the conflict.

## **Changing tactics from military to political**

There is no military solution to this conflict. If we compare each fighting group/coalition in Syria separately then, perhaps, the regime forces are the most effective. This, however, does not mean that they have the ability to defeat their opponents *and* maintain all the regained territories. Hence, military actions on the ground should have *political* objectives (such as a negotiated end to violence) and not *militaristic* (such as a military victory). The same concerns the opposition groups; fighting for a regime change in Syria is not realistic as long as they do not receive significant military aid from outside. So, their military activities should also be for political purposes.

The Syrian government is confronting multiple armed groups who use guerrilla tactics and have received enough support to continue fighting. Defeating such non-state groups is an impossible dream. The world's strongest army (the US Army) along with other military forces could not neutralize the Taliban in Afghanistan, which does not have international support as

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<sup>3</sup> There are cases where two opposition groups (non-state actors) sign a truce where the government is not involved. These cases, however, are outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> See Turkmani et al. "Hungry for Peace" pp. 25-30.

the key Syrian rebel groups have. This example illustrates how unproductive it is for the Syrian government, and the allies who fight with it, to use only military ends.

Furthermore, the government's strategy traps its forces in an unending cycle of violence. The regime's forces repeatedly win battles and reoccupy territories only to lose them again. This cycle has been repeating itself since the beginning of the civil war. At first, the government used to win most of the battles, unlike now when it suffers great losses across Syria. This indicates that the sooner the government translates its military victories into political gains, the better off it will be. If the government agrees to start serious negotiations for settlement on the local level, it would have a strong position due to its strong military presence on the ground. Increasingly, it is becoming militarily devastated which means it is also losing its power as a negotiator on the political level.

The government treats ceasefires a military tactic. It makes people starve to death or surrender. In this way, the government may win battles but not the war; it may win tactically but lose strategically. This starvation policy does not bring any solution, it only postpones the problem and the later the government deals with the actual cause of the problem, the weaker its position will be. In short, this militaristic strategy will backfire on the regime.

If we think about using ceasefire agreements tactics, as means to achieve political ends, rather than military ones, then the government has an interest in making them closer to win-win situations, even if the opposition was not that strong. By following this approach, the government might not win militarily but it would gain politically, which is more important on the wider scale. In this way, not only the ruling elite but also Syria and the ordinary people in Syria would greatly benefit, especially from a humanitarian perspective. The government would gain three benefits from this approach.

First, the more humane these agreements are, the more sustainable they would become. As explained by Turkmani et al, the Barzeh agreement, which was close to a win-win outcome, proved to be more sustainable than the other examples presented in that research. Sustainability of the agreement eases the humanitarian situation. It also takes the regime's troops out of the cycle of violence. Imposing inhumane conditions will postpone the problem which, as explained above, is not in the regime's interest.

Second, if the government cares to settle the ceasefire agreements in a more humane way, it would also regain some legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> Even though it claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, it is obvious that today there is a legitimacy crisis in Syria; no side alone can represent Syrians. By trying to reach a relatively win-win situation in these ceasefires, and by agreeing to address at least some of the core problems, it may gain legitimacy from inside as a partner for conflict resolution.

Third, achieving a win-win situation on the local level would delegitimize the foreign support, which in my opinion, keeps the fight going. Evidence shows that foreign actors, such as Qataris and Iranians, have been involved in these local negotiations, and often proved to be spoilers. Nevertheless, this kind of foreign interference remains marginal if we compare it

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<sup>5</sup> It is understandable that most of the armed opposition groups see the government as illegitimate. However, we should consider that the government is a strong actor, and in wars, legitimacy mostly comes from military power on the ground and not democratic votes.

with the foreign involvement in the Syrian conflict on the international level. The government should utilize this opportunity and support a plan of local conflict resolution.

On the issue of foreign intervention, it is also crucial to highlight that the Syrian government is receiving considerable foreign support. This, in basic international relations terms, means dependency. This increasing dependency will be very harmful in the long run for the Syrian state. If we consider that the ruling elite cares for their survival rather than the interests of the Syrian state, then dependency is also harmful for their interests. Making the local ceasefires closer to a win-win situation is a good opportunity for the Syrian state to re-establish itself inside the country and decrease dependency on Iran, Russia and other key supporters. Through localized and rather small scale solutions, the regime would have more chance to resist foreign pressure.

## **Conclusion**

In light of the government's strategy thus far, it is not very likely that it will change its military objectives to political ones. While writing this article, the regime's forces and the armed opposition in Aleppo are trying to maximize their military gains to have a strong position around the negotiation table. If this happens, then it would mean that the government, at least in Aleppo, is willing to subdue its military strategy for political ends. It is important to note that "freezing" the fighting or starting any possible negotiations after that may still fail, but the fact that both sides are coming together is a major achievement. The De Mistura truce for Aleppo aims at changing the military struggle in Aleppo to a political one in the forms of negotiations.

Despite all the negatives indications, there are also positives ones which should not be overlooked. As Turkmani et al. explain, the civil society in Syria is very active and committed to stopping major violent activities. This is fundamental for any local peace process. The people also seem to be supportive of this approach to ending the violence. For example the survey conducted by the OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies of 1,000 people from Damascus, Damascus suburbs and Homs, showed that 69% of the participants generally support the ceasefire agreements, though they remains suspicious, insecure and socio-economically deprived.<sup>6</sup> Such significant support for the principle of ceasefires should be used to reach a more sustainable solution where at least the basic needs of the citizens would be guaranteed.

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<sup>6</sup> OMRAN Center for Strategic Studies, "Cease Fire Agreements in Syria and their Effectiveness: A Public Opinion Poll," 30 September 2014.  
[http://www.omrandirasat.org/sites/default/files/cease%20fire%20poll%20analysis\\_0.pdf](http://www.omrandirasat.org/sites/default/files/cease%20fire%20poll%20analysis_0.pdf)

### **About the author**

Armenak Tokmajyan is a Research Associate at Tampere Peace Research Institute (Tapri), Finland. His main areas of research interest include the dynamics of peace and conflict in the Middle East, especially Syria, and the conflict situation in the South Caucasus. Armenak Tokmajyan is the author of a number of research paper such as “Militarization of the Syrian Revolution: Was this the Wrong Choice,” *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*; “Conflict Transformation in Syria,” *Tampere University Press*; “Hezbollah’s Intervention in Syria: Religious Obligation or Political Choice?” journal of *Approaching Religion*; “Can Nagorno-Karabakh Be Part of Azerbaijan?” *The Washington Review: A Journal of Turkish and Eurasian Affairs*.

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[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)