CHAPTER 6

Exploring Mediation Efforts Amid Systemic and Domestic Constraints: The Case of the Syrian Conflict

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Introduction[1]

Complex, protracted, and recurring intrastate conflicts remain one of the biggest contemporary threats to global peace. They increasingly require pragmatic and context-specific peace actions—peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding—to be implemented and effectively coordinated at all stages of the conflict cycle. Any external actor involved with peace initiatives in such a complex context is increasingly asked to recognize the context and embrace adaptiveness in interventions as well as to support, as much as possible, the inclusion of national and local actors in the peace process.

[1] Disclaimer: The views and interpretations expressed in this chapter are the result of the author's analysis and do not necessarily represent those of the organizations or persons mentioned.

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The issue of context recognition is particularly relevant to the case of international cooperation for peace in Syria, one of the most challenging political and humanitarian crises since World War II. Mediation in the context of the Syrian conflict has been described as a mission impossible, during which some of the world's most experienced mediators could not achieve a comprehensive ceasefire, and the context-specific humanitarian ceasefires that were agreed could not be sustained for long. Moreover, a comprehensive contextual analysis of the Syrian conflict, not only from the international and national perspectives, which are contested and changing, but also from the local perspective within Syrian borders, is crucially significant.

The preconditions necessary for mediation to work are introduced by de Coning in Chap. 2 and are as follows: (1) the parties are willing to accept a negotiated solution; (2) they are ready to choose mediation as the method of negotiating a ceasefire or peace agreement and accept a neutral third-party mediator; (3) the parties can negotiate without the negative influence of international pressure or interventions. This chapter reflects on these assumptions, specifically their relevance and applicability in the Syrian conflict. The study is based on data collected via semi-structured interviews conducted with the Syrian people and International NGOs (INGOs) involved in the Syrian platforms, and media analysis on topics related to mediation of armed conflicts, complemented by empirical evidence that explains the mediation dynamics and outcomes during the period from 2011 to 2019.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. First, it demonstrates how the disagreement between the permanent member states (P5) of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the mediation process initiated by the League of Arab States (LAS) affected the activities of the first and second UN Special Envoys. Second, it reveals the domestic constraints in addition to further systemic constraints, which conditioned the activities of the third and fourth Special Envoys; as the fourth Special Envoy is still active at the time of writing, this chapter covers only the period up to the establishment of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in September 2019. Third, it analyzes the contributions of other nonstate actors, specifically civil society and INGOs, to the mediation efforts in Syria during the conflict.

Based on these examinations of both systematic and domestic constraints, the chapter reveals how external actors got involved in the Syrian conflict shortly after the start of the unrest and how the four Special

Envoys appointed by the UN attempted to adapt to such context in facilitating mediation among domestic parties. Hence, it argues that international factors have affected the Special Envoys' mediation efforts in the Syrian conflict. Moreover, the profusion of non-state armed groups added an unavoidable element of complexity that needs to be taken into consideration by mediators and peacebuilders. It also asserts the complex effects of the absence of a concrete agreement on the practices of mediation or a compromise at the international and national levels. In conclusion, the chapter sheds light on the significance and challenges of contextualized and adaptive approaches that will have the potential to promote further contacts among Syrian citizens and open the pathways for mediators to deal more effectively with the conflict.

Systemic Constraints and the Challenges of Establishing a Syrian Transitional Government

This section describes the factors that undermined conventional and high-level mediation efforts during the first four years of the conflict. It examines the different parties involved and their conflicting priorities to reveal how the responses by the international community developed in this complex context and the challenges of establishing a transitional government. The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 with the civil demonstrations in Dara'a, a city in the Southern region of the country, and it became internationalized only a month later. The P5 could not develop a unified response to end the conflict, recreating similar systemic challenges as those presented by the Cold War era. In the UNSC meeting in April 2011, Russia strongly supported the Syrian government, and China followed the same position. France, the UK, and the US supported the opposition (UNSC 2011a). There was no consensus among the P5 over who was responsible for the violence. Thus, it was not the UN but the LAS which was the first to attempt mediation within this context. Traditionally, the LAS has had a policy of nonintervention in the sovereignty of its member states (League of Arab States 1945). However, the change of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring[2] and NATO's activities in Libya led the LAS to demand concessions from the Syrian government, holding it responsible for the violence (Küçükkeleş 2012).

[2] The so-called Arab Spring is the political upheaval that began in Tunisia at the end of 2010 and resulted in the ouster of presidents in that country, as well as in Egypt and Yemen.

Among the Syrian government, the conflict was perceived as a domestic political matter from the beginning that did not require international attention. Thus, the mediation activities conducted by the LAS were perceived as not being meaningful, at least for one of the parties: the Syrian government led by Bashar Al-Assad. It first urged the government to stop the violence and engage in dialogue with the opposition. When this did not happen, the LAS suspended Syria's membership in the league and imposed sanctions in November 2011 (Batty and Shenker 2011). It dispatched a LAS Monitoring Team in the next month to end the violence. Later in January 2012, the LAS introduced the "Arab Plan to Resolve the Syrian Crisis," which included forming a national unity government comprised of the existing government and the opposition, operating under a mutually agreed leader within two months of the start of the dialogue. The plan would grant all presidential powers to the vice president to cooperate fully with a national unity government, and it would enable the drafting of a new constitution for approval by referendum (UNSC 2012a). Despite the continued disagreement among the P5 (e.g., UNSC 2011b, 2012b), the LAS pressed for significant concessions, which the government did not accept. The LAS mediation strategy of resolving the conflict included the requirement that the Syrian president delegate his power before the formation of a transitional government, a strategy backed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 2012). However, this method of imposing a demand did not achieve effective results in bringing both sides to the negotiation table.

Later in February 2012, an alternative mediation method was introduced, with the UN and the LAS jointly appointing Kofi Annan[3] as the Special Envoy to Syria. His mediation efforts were partially successful. Considering the challenging situation that resulted from the lack of consensus among the P5, the Special Envoy's main focus was not to resolve the conflict but instead to "reduce the violence first" (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 7). Annan's six-point plan requested all the contested parties to cooperate with the Special Envoy, effectively ending violence and starting "an inclusive Syrian-led peace process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people" (UNSC 2012c, 1). According to the UNSC document S/PRST/2012/6, the P5 unanimously supported the six-point plan, and both the Syrian government and

[3] For additional details on Annan's mediation, see Hinnebusch and Zartman (2016) and Lundgren (2016).

the opposition accepted it (Annan 2012). This compromise resulted in the adoption of resolutions 2042 and 2043 (UNSC 2012d, 2012e) to deploy the UN Supervision Mission in Syria (i.e., UNSMIS). However, though violence decreased somewhat following the dispatch of UNSMIS in April 2012 (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 8; Lundgren 2016), it flared up again. The Special Envoy was unable to take effective measures due to the P5 confrontation, and by mid-June the UNSMIS suspended its activities due to the deteriorating security situation (UN News 2012).

Annan tried to sustain the P5 agreement in order to continue his mediation efforts and effectively reduce violence by organizing an international conference. The consensus document of this international conference, later known as the "Geneva Communiqué," became the primary document in the Special Envoys' subsequent mediation strategy. This document seems to have adopted a mix of standard and adaptive mediation approaches. First, it specified the establishment of a transitional government, but it allowed for all government institutions, including the military and security forces, to remain on the condition of gaining "public confidence"(UNSC 2012f). Annan "knew what had to be avoided: the experience of the chaos unleashed by the US invasion of Iraq meant the state had to be preserved and a transition arranged that would avoid its collapse" (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 7). Thus, he called for the withdrawal of heavy weapons by military and security forces in populated areas (UNSC 2012c). This mixed approach presented a promising mediation alternative, leaving Syria's public institutions, which were to some extent effective before the conflict, in the confidence of the people under a transitional government. In addition to mitigating the deep disagreement among the P5, the approach also considered the internal context in Syria. The mediators learned from the first LAS attempt that the Syrian government would not accept any effort that required the president to step down as a precondition. The Special Envoy thus adapted his mediation efforts to one that recognized and involved the Syrian government.

However, the Geneva Communiqué introduced a "creative ambiguity" regarding the transitional government members (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 9). The document mentioned that transitional government members would consist of both the Syrian government and the opposition, determined by mutual consent. Thus, according to Hinnebusch and Zartman (2016, 9), for Russia, the Geneva Communiqué did not presuppose the president's immediate resignation, whereas the US assumed that the opposition would not agree to having the president as a

member of the transitional government. Therefore, the Syrian government did not follow the Geneva Communiqué, and the opposition rejected it because it did not require the president's immediate resignation.[4] Consequently, the Geneva Communiqué remained only a "Geneva conference agreement" that was not adopted as a UNSC resolution until a year after the conference. The circumstances led to Annan's resignation, which was also affected by the UNSMIS withdrawal from Syria, its extension being vetoed in the UNSC.

Annan's mediation approach seemed to prioritize the consent of the P5 and ideally create a situation in which both parties would join the peace process; however, the disagreement among the P5 persisted through ineffective negotiations in Geneva. Moreover, most Syrian parties, that is, the government, the opposition, and the civil society, were not invited or could not travel to Switzerland. The fact that neither warring party was part of the negotiations in Geneva added determined-designed characteristics to the mediation process, while adaptive mediation characteristics, such as promoting self-organization and resilience involving both parties, were absent at this stage. Although Annan recognized the importance of the role of the Syrian civil society (Hellmüller and Zahar 2019), he gave priority to addressing the international context and the P5 disagreement in this stage of the mediation process, and failed to focus on Syria's conflict management and resolution.

Mediation methods that prioritized the international context persisted even after Annan's resignation. Like his predecessor, the second UN Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi,[5] started by focusing mediation on decreasing conflict rather than initiating a ceasefire. However, this strategy achieved little progress, and Brahimi took time to build relations with the government after mentioning the need for the president's resignation (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 13). On the other hand, he was also having difficulty interacting with the rebels. France, the UK, the US, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and some other LAS members decided to support the Syrian Opposition Coalition (i.e., SOC) based in Turkey. However, the SOC's effective control was limited to a few areas in Syria, and the coalition failed to unite hundreds of armed opposition groups. Its leadership

[4] Turkey is said to have urged the opposition groups to reject the Geneva Communiqué (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 11).

[5] For additional details on Brahimi's mediation, see Hinnebusch and Zartman (2016) and Lundgren (2016).

was not effective enough (Ṣāyigh 2013). Therefore, it was challenging for mediators to find an opposition leader that fully represented all opposition stakeholders at the negotiation table. For Brahimi, the circumstances were not conducive to the implementation of standard mediation.

In this context, Brahimi's mediation strategy focused on (1) facilitating small-scale ceasefires to implement humanitarian assistance and (2) addressing the international context with the aim of implementing the Geneva Communiqué. First, Brahimi focused on the regional level by involving Iran to seek influence over the government; however, this strategy failed to gain the support of the LAS. Like his predecessor, Brahimi expected to eventually leverage the influence of Russia and the US in the peace process (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016; Lundgren 2016). However, seeking a consensus between the P5 members was still challenging and did not result in effective mediation outcomes. The "Geneva 2" international conference was held in 2014, but the assembled parties failed to find a path to a ceasefire. Brahimi subsequently resigned. Nevertheless, the Geneva 2 conference produced some positive outcomes: (1) the government and the opposition gathered in the same place for the first time, and (2) they agreed to let women and children evacuate from Homs, a city besieged by the government (UN News 2014).

These outcomes can be seen as a result of Brahimi's mediation focused on small-scale ceasefires and humanitarian assistance. However, it is also important to note that, as was true during the Geneva conference, members of Syrian civil society were not invited to the Geneva 2 negotiations, although Brahimi was aware of the importance of involving them (Hellmüller and Zahar 2019, 86). The civil society lobbied for an inclusive peace process instead of a government versus anti-government dichotomic strategy, which resulted in the creation of "a small diverse group comprised of civil society figures to act as a sounding board of ideas to the Special Envoy" (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 9). The mediation strategy, however, continued to focus on accommodating the challenges posed by systemic constraints due to disagreements among the P5. This made mediation efforts ineffective, and Brahimi's mediation team could not develop a more adaptive mediation structure.

In summary, key systemic constraints presented by the P5 disagreement and, backed by this dispute, the unwillingness of contested parties to seek a negotiated solution challenged three mediation architectures (i.e., the LAS, Annan, and Brahimi) in Syria. The LAS actively took one side.

Following the government's rejection of the LAS mediation strategy, two of the most reputable mediators in the world, Annan and Brahimi, distanced themselves from this precondition (the resignation of the president) and focused on addressing the P5 issue instead. The two UN Special Envoys sought to create an enabling environment for negotiations, seeking to form a transitional government. This resulted in an initial reduction of violence, but a consensus among the P5 was not achieved, similar to the bipolar constraints of the Cold War era (Lundgren 2019). Those external factors clearly affected the efforts of the two Special Envoys for adaptive mediation. As Lundgren (2020) notes, the mediation strategies of both the LAS and the UN, during the first phase of mediation in Syria, were conditioned by its organizational capacities and member state preferences. This conditionality is one explanation for the long-term ineffectiveness of the mediations.

With the support of the external actors, the contested parties believed in defeating the opponents (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016, 19) and were not ready to join mediation with their initiatives. As argued in Chap. 2, adaptive mediation is an approach "concerned with enhancing the self-sustainability of the agreements reached." To reach a ceasefire agreement, the contested parties are expected to welcome international mediation as a way to resolve the conflict and then accept a neutral third-party mediator. However, in the case of the Syrian conflict, in the initial mediation stage, the LAS was not necessarily neutral or impartial. Thus, the involved parties were not convinced that mediation would be the better solution than fighting or matching their interests. It can be argued that the ineffectiveness of this mediation phase in Syria indicates that it was premature for both parties to engage with mediation activities toward a peace agreement. This Syrian context reveals how an effective mediation process needs to be facilitated through pragmatism and adaptiveness. For instance, Annan's plan to "reduce the violence first" (Hinnebusch and Zartman 2016) and Brahimi's focus on small-scale ceasefires and humanitarian assistance are examples of adaptive steps to address the contextual constraints against mediation in Syria. Such adaptiveness and effectiveness explain how mediation activities could continue despite high levels of uncertainty and complexity.

Domestic Constraints and the Challenges of Addressing a Changing Syrian Conflict Context

This section discusses the changing context of the Syrian conflict, as well as how it affected mediation efforts by the third and fourth UN Special Envoys. It also highlights how the highly dynamic context that is typical of complex conflict systems, as observed in the Syrian conflict, propelled the mediators to continuously explore new adaptive pathways to reach an agreement. The analysis in this section covers the period from when Russia commenced airstrikes on Syrian territory in September 2015, in the wake of the expansion of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), until the establishment of the Constitutional Committee. Russia was then criticized for targeting US-backed and armed rebels rather than ISIL (Roth et al. 2015), thus turning the conflict's tide in favor of the Syrian government.

The disagreement among the P5 continued during the period of the third UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura. The conflict situation was effectively reversed to the advantage of the Syrian government, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. In November 2015, 20 countries and institutions, including the P5, some LAS members, and Iran (not invited to either Geneva conference), held a meeting, known as the Vienna Peace Talks for Syria, and agreed to form the International Syria Support Group (ISSG); the ISSG agreed on a framework for a nationwide ceasefire and a parallel peace process in Syria. The US concessions on Iranian participation signaled a clear shift in the peace process (Mohammed and Murphy 2015). Following the ISSG agreement, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2254 (UNSC 2015), which set out the process for implementing the Geneva Communiqué mentioned earlier, and the document became the basis for the peace process initiated in 2016. The compromise between the P5, the LAS, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran urged the Syrian government and the opposition to consider further collaboration to end the conflict. Thus, negotiations between the parties began only after nearly five years of conflict, when they were prompted by external parties.

In this context, Saudi Arabia, one of the supporters of the oppositions, contributed to the coming mediation. It convened a High Negotiations Committee (HNC) following the adoption of UN Resolution 2254 (UNSC 2015), with the task of selecting new members for the peace process. More than 100 opposition groups, including armed groups that had not shown interest in the Geneva conferences, met to coordinate their

participation in the overall peace process. Russia could also participate in the HNC selection process (Lund 2015). However, the main Kurdish group and radical armed groups such as ISIL were excluded from it. Also, this process revealed disagreements among opposition groups on the issue of the Syrian president's resignation (Lund 2015) and uncertainty regarding whether the opposition was prepared to unite and genuinely compromise to a negotiated end of the conflict. Similarly, the Syrian government was unlikely to feel the need to compromise, as it had the upper hand in the conflict. In other words, the mediation process could achieve some consensus only at the international level but was not effective enough to enable an agreement between the local parties; influenced by international interventions, the local parties were still not ready to choose mediation as the method of negotiating a nationwide ceasefire or peace agreement.

The lack of commitment of contested parties to end hostilities made the context uncertain for the mediation by de Mistura. Based on the agreement among ISSG members and UN Resolution 2254, he attempted to focus on bringing the Syrian government and the opposition groups to the negotiation table (UNSC 2016a). However, though the contested parties gathered in Geneva in January 2016, face-to-face meetings were not possible, and de Mistura had to continue shuttle diplomacy—traveling between two or more parties that are reluctant to hold direct discussions. His effort ended after a week (BBC News 2016). In response, "the ISSG presented a proposal for a nationwide 'cessation of hostilities', further outlined in a joint statement by Russia and the United States on February 22, 2016, and endorsed by the Security Council in Resolution 2268" (Lundgren 2016, 278; UNSC 2016b). This proposal was agreed upon by the government and more than 40 opposition groups, and the violence sharply declined for the first time in four years (Lundgren 2016, 278). Akpınar (2016) points out that the external actors concerned with the Syrian crisis were neither neutral nor impartial and that this affected the mediation by the Special Envoys, as this chapter has also demonstrated in detail. The few international agreements achieved in this time simplified the complexity and facilitated the cessation of hostilities among the contested parties.

However, the agreements held for at best three months because of both systematic and domestic constraints. Again, the radical armed groups such as ISIL were excluded from the international agreement. Moreover, the issue of the president's resignation resurfaced among the ISSG during this period (Lundgren 2016, 279), and the original political framework with

Russia backing the government and the US backing some of the opposition groups resumed (e.g., see UNSC 2016c; Gordon and Kramer 2016). In the later part of 2016, Russia, in collaboration with Turkey and Iran, established a new direct political dialogue, known as the Astana talks, which included "all conflicting parties in the Syrian Arab Republic (UNSC 2016d)"[6] and worked as a separate framework parallel to the ISSG. Again, a P5 compromise did not last, and divergent perceptions on how to end the conflict, resulting from systemic constraints, continued. A member of the "National Agenda for the Future of Syria" (NAFS)[7] mentioned, "Many agencies and countries have supported the groups of oppositions to strengthen them and enable them to negotiate. However, at the end, I believe such inputs created the oppositions, not for supporting the solution" (Interviewee 2 2020). The rise of a new external framework concerned with the peace process illustrates the increasing complexity of the context of the Syrian conflict.

Some aspects of the Astana talks were similar to mediation efforts undertaken by great powers during the Cold War, as Lundgren argues (2019, 14), particularly the efforts of the US and the former Soviet Union to secure influence on their respective blocs. In the changed conflict context, the talks ensured the Syrian government's superiority in the conflict. Still, the launch of this framework was followed by the Security Council's adoption of a resolution welcoming a tripartite agreement (UNSC 2016e). The agreement was perceived as being pragmatic, and it was expected to improve the devastating humanitarian situation, especially in the besieged areas (UNSC 2017a). The Astana talks, which included "a wider participation of opposition actors with real battlefield influence" (Lundgren 2019, 9) than the Geneva talks that began in 2016 had, realized face-to-face negotiations (Cengiz 2020). Lundgren (2019) and Cengiz (2020) argue that Russia, which led the Astana talks, and Turkey and Iran, which cooperated, were parties to the conflict, and thus were not mediators in the strict sense of neutrality, but rather sponsors, or "guarantor states," of the peace process they initiated. The three countries gave up on ineffective mediation and developed a framework to adapt to the reality that the regime had gained the upper hand in the conflict.

[6] However, for example, some of the Kurdish groups that controlled the northern area weren't invited (France 24 2017).

[7] The next section refers to NAFS.

The UN mediation adaptively responded to an increasingly complex context that was beyond the reproduction of Cold War structures (Lundgren 2019, 10). This also followed the approach of the two former Special Envoys, Annan and Brahimi, to reduce violence and address the deteriorating humanitarian situation through small-scale suspension of violence (Hinnebusch and Imady 2017, 1). In addition, there were mediation attempts to seek collaborations between the government and opposition beyond the scope of humanitarian ceasefires. For example, there was a joint program plan to promote crops and their sales, although it ultimately failed to reach an agreement (Interviewee 1 2000). Such a program further aimed at building trust between the two sides through dialogue and attempted to restore self-organization and resilience in Syria, where the administrative system had managed to function before the conflict.

Another example of adaptive mediation was the UN's welcome of the agreement among Russia, Turkey, and Iran at the Astana conference in May 2017 to establish four de-escalation zones in Syria. There was a hope that this would ensure access to humanitarian assistance deliveries despite the ongoing war and violence (UNSC 2017b). However, the result was not successful while the conflict continued to escalate (UNSC 2018), as the government moved its military forces from the de-escalation zones to fight with ISIL and other armed opposition groups instead. As a result, the government was able to retake three of the four de-escalation zones by mid-2019 (Lundgren 2019, 10). In such areas, some opposition groups kept control after the small-scale and bottom-up cessation of hostilities, but some of these ceasefires converged into surrender to the government (Hinnebusch and Imady 2017). The government clearly regained lost ground, and the mediation context was changed from its initial configuration.

From that point onward, the mediation process focused on the establishment of a constitutional committee, as proposed during the Astana talks and as part of the peace process set out in the Geneva Communiqué. The Constitutional Committee was an attempt to facilitate direct dialogue among contested parties. In January 2018, the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in Sochi, Russia, approved a list of candidates for the Constitutional Committee (UNSC 2018). The actual establishment of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva was then the subject of intensive mediation by de Mistura, who was succeeded by the fourth UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen. The participation of Syrian experts, the

civil society, independent organizations, tribal chiefs and women, the government, and the opposition were confirmed in this process (UNSC 2018). The Syrian civil society officially participated in the peace process for the first time. In October 2019, the Constitutional Committee was established with 50 members of the government, 50 members of the opposition, and 50 civilian representatives (UN Special Envoy for Syria 2019). It took a year and a half to finalize the Committee members despite the UN mediation efforts (Lundgren 2019, 7). Moreover, Lundgren (2019) highlights how the framework formed by the guarantor states separate from the ISSG succeeded in removing talks regarding the transitional government and the consequent resignation of the president from its scope. The establishment of the Constitutional Committee may have been a major achievement in adapting to a situation where mediation for a ceasefire had been unsuccessful, and the prospects of achieving its original purpose of resolving protracted conflicts still seemed remote.

This section summarizes the context surrounding the mediation of the third and fourth UN Special Envoys. Insights from complexity science, specifically about how complex systems evolve and respond to pressure, help to understand this context. First, the UN mediation was influenced by the Astana talks. Second, the continuous changes in conflict dynamics forced the mediation process to respond pragmatically. Third, the mediation process and related goals were, for the most part, externally determined. Hence, when the Syrian government gained the upper hand in the conflict in 2015, Russia strengthened this superiority with the Astana talks being led by the guarantor states. This change in the political power over the mediation process led the mediators to prioritize coordination with the government accordingly and adaptively. One of the key dimensions of the complexity of the Syrian conflict rests on nonlinear and emerging relationships between the conflicting parties and components of the system. The parties to the conflict could not sustain the continuous motivation to engage in the mediation.

Despite the challenges posed by disagreements among key actors, and the lack of commitment and coordination, the Special Envoys successfully facilitated the creation of the Constitutional Committee under challenging systemic constraints and a changing conflict context. In addition, de Mistura tried to promote a temporary and area-limited local cessation of hostilities, even though they were not always successful. Akpınar (2016) notes that de Mistura's mediation strategy achieved many positive outcomes, "such as the longest and broadest ceasefire, access to the majority

of besieged areas, considerable de-escalation of violence, and commitment among major actors towards a resolution" (Akpınar 2016, 11). Moreover, the UN's continued dialogue with civil society actors paved the way for the participation of the Syrian civil society in the peace process, for more context-specific solutions and a mediation strategy more inclusive of the local context and local narratives.

The Role of Civil Society in Contextualizing the Mediation Architecture

This section details the role and activities of the civil society in contextualizing mediation efforts by the third and fourth Special Envoys. According to Khalaf et al. (2014), it is important to note that before the conflict, most of the nongovernmental organizations (i.e., NGOs) in Syria were engaged in charity (see also Slim and Trombetta 2014). Syrian and Arab culture places great emphasis on generosity (Bosman 2012), and these institutions were able to contribute to the protection of many vulnerable Syrian families. In the 1990s, around 600 organizations were registered with the government, although relatively little is known about them due to the absence of reliable data on their activities. In 2007, a platform for government-registered NGOs was created under the UNDP's auspices (Khalaf et al. 2014). By 2010, the total number of registered NGOs was 1047 (Hellmüller and Zahar 2019). As the country entered the civil war, some of these organizations became inactive, while others, particularly those with a philanthropic background, became more active in humanitarian assistance (Slim and Trombetta 2014, 43). According to a survey conducted by the voluntary organization, "Citizens for Syria," there were 802 voluntary organizations across Syria in the first half of 2015, and some worked in areas other than charity, such as civic engagement and advocacy, media and communications, and development and housing (Citizens for Syria 2015, 13–14). Although details are not available, a variety of civil society organizations are still working for social change in Syria and could offer relevant contributions to contextualize mediation efforts and support the self-organization capabilities of the various components of the Syrian complex system.

As elaborated in previous sections, Syrian civil society actors did not directly participate in the mediation processes headed by Annan and Brahimi. The Syrian people were considered to be on the side of either the

government or the opposition (Hellmüller and Zahar 2019), and their interest did not attract international attention. Addressing systemic constraints and focusing on external actors' influence seemed to have dominated mediation strategies until de Mistura expressed a strong desire to allow more civil society participation. Concurrently with the peace talk that was quickly terminated at the beginning of 2016, as described in the previous section, the Special Envoy set up the Syrian "Civil Society Support Room" (i.e., CSSR) in Geneva, where "more than 500 members of Syrian civil society, one third of them women, including Syrian experts and technocrats" participated in the discussions (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 5). While the first few sessions were dominated by expatriate Syrian men supporting the opposition, a more comprehensive range of civil society members who had distanced themselves from the government/opposition dichotomy gradually became involved (Turkmani and Theros 2019; Hellmüller and Zahar 2019). The participants provided the Special Envoy with expertise and information based on the local context, which contributed to his mediation efforts, particularly when considering the challenges presented by the Astana talks (Hellmüller and Zahar 2019, 86). In this regard, it is also important to note the creation of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, established in February 2016 and composed of 12 independent Syrian civil society representatives from diverse backgrounds. The members of this group would share their experiences with the Special Envoy and other stakeholders and contribute to "exploring solutions for lasting peace" (UN Women 2016).

Through the CSSR, the Syrian civil society not only contributed to the peace process but could also strengthen its network by joining this platform. According to the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF), the CSSR increased its membership gradually (Interview to NOREF 2021), becoming more diverse with time and including NGOs and CSOs working both internally and externally in the fields of peacebuilding, law, and humanitarian work. It was consisted of "prominent figures, including legal and constitutional experts, university professors, and former government advisors" (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 20). The meeting locations were also extended to Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan through video conferences for those citizens who could not make it to Geneva[8] (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 9, 24). Some of the CSSR members

[8] On the other hand, Turkmani and Theros pointed out that local actors in Kurdish-controlled areas found it difficult to travel to Geneva, had limited representation, and had

also joined another platform called the "National Agenda for the Future of Syria" (NAFS). The NAFS is a program established by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) that includes a platform for technical dialogue which relies on an inclusive network of Syrian experts to develop all the analysis and policy options presented, and is distant from the peace process. The participants consist of Syrian technocrats and experts engaged in research and analysis to prepare essential documents for future state-building (Bymolt 2016).

It is possible to extract several implications from the CSSR's role in the Syrian peace process. First, it strengthened the participants' network beyond the discourses of the dichotomy of government versus the oppositions.

> Civil society from different geographies and perspectives, as opposed to political negotiating delegations, were able to sit down together and discuss important issues, (…) the process of coming together helped to dilute binary narratives, break down stereotypes of the 'other' and expand opportunities for dialogue and networking across lines of conflict. (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 12)

Therefore, the CSSR could serve as a place where people with different opinions met and exchanged perspectives and strengthened existing networks or formed new ones, regardless of where they were based or their backgrounds and positions. The availability to travel to Geneva was not the requirement for participation (Interview with NOREF 2021).

Second, the CSSR discussions had an impact on the peace process and mediation efforts. Hellmüller and Zahar (2019, 86) point out that:

> They [the participants] enable the mediation team to design a more context-sensitive process—whether on urgent local needs and priorities, legal and constitutional issues, elections, detainees, missing persons and abductees, transitional justice, or other topics, this local knowledge and expertise provides important information about the reality on the ground.

In this way, the discussion in the CSSR supplemented the Geneva talks with the perspective of civil society (Hellmüller and Zahar 2019), facilitating potential agreements although the political negotiations were reaching

difficulty sharing information between organizations (Turkmani and Theros 2019, 23–25). They would be excluded from both the Astana and the Geneva talks.

an impasse (Turkmani and Theros 2019). Therefore, the CSSR's effective contribution offered needed contextualization to the UN-led Geneva talks, bringing the mediation strategy and architecture closer to an adaptive mediation approach coexisting in parallel with the Russian-driven Astana talks.

In addition to the CSSR, INGOs played a significant role in the Syrian civil society. For example, the Finnish Evangelic-Lutheran Mission (FELM), in collaboration with the Common Space Initiative (CSI), supported the Syria Initiative (SI) program, which by the end of 2016 had initiated 15 dialogue forums between Syrians inside and outside the country (Lehti 2019). The program aimed at expanding the process of transforming violence into peace through civil society dialogues and connected them with the UN-led peace process. Furthermore, some facilitators who supported the SI were also involved in the negotiations of the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, as introduced earlier (Lehti 2019). Thus, it can be said that the FELM and the CSI were developing bottom-up adaptive mediation. In addition, Tabak (2015) pointed out that the Humanitarian Relief Foundation in Turkey successfully mediated various conflict situations in Syria (e.g., the release of imprisoned and tortured citizens and journalists) (Tabak 2015). The activities of such INGOs have the potential to significantly promote people's aspirations for peace and transform the conflict. On the other hand, Lehti (2019) argued that the free space for private mediators had been curtailed due to the domestic constraints in the conflict, which were also discussed in this chapter. In order to promote effective bottom-up interactive mediation in civil society, it is important for INGOs to link and complement their activities with the high-level adaptive mediation led by the UN.

On the other hand, the CSSR's contribution to the peace process has been limited in practice. Both the government and the opposition feared that civil society would represent different interests and grow into a third party (Hellmüller 2020, 11). According to Turkmani and Theros (2019, 19), the perceptions of CSSR participants on the role of the platform were more comprehensive than forming a third party to the peace process. They included representing the views of the Syrian people, lobbying for international pressure on the armed forces, and providing professional expertise based on the ground. On the other hand, Hellmüller (2020) argues that the positioning of the CSSR as a supporting resource of the Special Envoy limited its contribution to the peace process. Although the participants offered technical expertise based on their diverse backgrounds,

the position of the CSSR turned those inputs into mere information or opinions to support some of the meetings in Geneva (Hellmüller 2020). Thus, although the CSSR was a platform that connected the peace process with civil society, it was not able to effectively bring civil society's interests and aspirations into the peace process.

This section analyzed the role of civil society in making contributions to the UN mediation efforts. The third and fourth UN Special Envoys' mediation style attempted to incorporate context-specific solutions and adaptive characteristics by allowing civil society members an active role in the mediation efforts. De Mistura established the CSSR, and Pedersen was able to maintain it, making the participation of civil society in the peace process more visible. The CSSR played a vital role in strengthening context-specific contributions from the Special Envoys and created a network of participants regardless of their physical location. Hence, it demonstrates how the Special Envoys attempted to develop a more contextualized and adaptive mediation structure despite systemic and domestic constraints. The diverse activities of INGOs would also support the development of civil society in Syria. On the other hand, the contributions of the Syrian civil society in the peace process remain limited. The armed conflict continues with the government's dominancy, and the economic and social fabric of Syrian civil society continues to suffer tremendous damage. It is, therefore, a challenge to link high-level mediation initiatives with support for civil society initiatives that lead to fundamental changes at the societal level.

The international and domestic constraints mentioned in this chapter have led to a situation where the peace process has largely neglected endogenous changes in the local communities towards self-organization and resilience. At the time of writing, no effective peace agreement was reached. While the civil society has been linked formally to the peace process through the CSSR and the Constitutional Committee and has been engaged in the NAFS platform for technical dialogue, ongoing mediation efforts have not allowed for civil society actors to play an essential role in the mediation process. While all four Special Envoys understood the need to involve civil society in the peace process, their formal engagement was hampered by rivalry among the P5 and the persistence of systematic and domestic constraints. In other words, the top-down imposition of externally led determined-designed solutions has consistently hampered mediation efforts in Syria.

Conclusion

This chapter attempted to explore mediation efforts within the context of the challenging systemic and domestic constraints of the Syrian conflict. All three prerequisites for a successful mediation activity did not apply to the Syrian conflict. It seemed premature to start standard mediation activities while it was almost impossible to avoid external interventions. Factors such as the P5 dynamics, the opposition groups' heterogeneity and disunity, the emergence of armed Islamist insurgencies (e.g., ISIL), and the current state of the conflict, which is advantageous to the government, appeared to have made the mediation process challenging. Many factors, such as a history of oppression, a precarious and uncompromising balance of power between the parties, and an uncompromising hostility, constitute an increasing complexity and will make it difficult to achieve successful mediation outcomes. There are three key insights for future mediation efforts in Syria that emerge from the mediation challenges mentioned in this chapter.

First, no mediation attempt has achieved a sustainable ceasefire in Syria yet. Systemic and domestic shifts and constraints made it difficult for mediation to result in an unwavering agreement between the contested parties. In this context, the LAS mediation architecture seemed to respond to a liberal order systemic configuration, as well as to the regional developments related to the upheaval of the so-called Arab Spring. On the other hand, the government's rejection of the LAS mediation indicates that there is a different understanding of such liberal international order. Furthermore, the fact that the rejection worked suggests that such a different understanding can function. Mediators have conducted mediation toward the establishment of a transitional government and have achieved some successes, but this has been externally driven based on a determined-designed direction. Then, a shift in the context of the conflict also led to dynamic changes in systemic and domestic constraints. The UN Special Envoys' mediation became subject to de facto mediation by the guarantors. This approach was adaptive in that the Astana talks kept the government's dominancy in the conflict while they involved many rebels in the talks. Nevertheless, so far, they have failed to achieve the ultimate aim of mediation, which was to bring about a sustainable ceasefire. The case of the Syrian conflict has clearly shown that it is challenging to facilitate such a ceasefire without the three premises mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. On the other hand, this case also revealed that even under such

constraints it is possible to achieve some results through adaptive mediation, promoting people's participation in the peace process.

Second, given the complexity and current systemic nature of international relations— that is, the change that occurred in recent history from bipolarity to unipolarity, and more recently from unipolarity to multipolarity—it is highly unlikely that determined-designed and liberal approaches to mediation will remain as an effective solution for internationalized protracted conflicts such as the Syrian case where two or more of the P5 have a direct and contested interest. The P5 disagreements detailed in this chapter appeared to be a revival of systemic constraints like those seen during the Cold War era. Both Annan and Brahimi had hoped for US and Russian leverage on both parties, but this did not always work. Applying mediation approaches with liberal values developed after the Cold War to the Syrian context shows that a similar structure to the Cold War may have been untenable (Lundgren 2019, 14). Furthermore, it should be noted that today, more than 30 years after the end of the Cold War, regional powers (e.g., LAS, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran) have gradually increased their international voice and role. Many of these emergent and influential powers are not necessarily in line with the values of the liberal order that emerged under the post–Cold War unipolar structure. The fact that there has been no path for sustainable peace in Syria indicates that no single external power has absolute influence over the Syrian government or the opposition. The emergence of a multipolar structure and the new role of regional powers make it more challenging for the Special Envoys to conduct mediation successfully. Perhaps the competition of the powers to influence the contested parties that they support undermines the adaptive capacity of the mediators and the parties themselves. This is because such powers are powerful enough to impose their positions, and it is almost impossible for the mediators and the parties to resist.

Third, there is the issue of ripeness of the parties to engage in mediation activities, according to Zartman (2001), that is, when did the parties have the intention to engage in mediation activities? In the case of the Syrian conflict, at the very least, it is possible to confirm that even when the parties started the "peace process" in 2016, there were no face-to-face negotiations; the Astana talks brought both sides to the negotiating table, but not by a neutral third party. In light of what has been discussed so far in this chapter, at the time of writing, the Geneva talks are also unlikely to

have made progress in negotiating a ceasefire. Hence, the time for negotiations toward peace may not yet mature. After all, all the involved sides discussed in this chapter, that is, France, the UK, the US, LAS, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and Iran, keep supporting the contested parties, influencing them to continue fighting. There were various moments of opportunity for breakthroughs and agreements as described in the previous sections, but the opportunity was repeatedly blocked by the reintroduction of the president's resignation. Thus, the core conditions necessary for sustainable mediation that motivate the contested parties seem to be absent.

It seems to be unlikely that the currently applied mediation practices will proceed toward a lasting ceasefire in the Syrian conflict. Still, if there is no action, the armed conflict may continue until (and possibly even after) one side wins the war. If peace actions are employed by mediators and peacebuilders, with a consideration of the aspirations of diverse groups of Syrian citizens such as those participating in the CSSR, to enable them to contribute to the peace process and to take important functions, it will serve as a positive mediation outcome of current mediation efforts. Civil society actors have formally participated in the peace process through the CSSR and the Constitutional Committee, and have been involved in the NAFS technical dialogue. However, ongoing mediation efforts have not enabled the Syrian civil society to play a vital role in the peace process. As discussed by de Coning in Chap. 2 of this book, mediation is widely understood as a delicate and complex undertaking and is more likely to fail to achieve its set objectives than to succeed. However, as Andrew Mack argues (in De Coning, Chap. 2), even failed mediations could save lives to some extent.

Adaptive mediation is an approach focused on finding a resolution to the conflict by recognizing its complexity, unpredictability, and uncertainty and by employing a set of tools that help mediators and peacebuilders to cope with setbacks and shocks. The different mediation efforts in the Syrian case give glimpses of what such adaptive mediation may look like in a protracted conflict, including the following: Annan's plan to have the first international conference, which led to the development of Geneva Communique; Brahimi and de Mistura's focus on small-scale ceasefires and humanitarian assistance; the initiation of the Constitutional Committee during the Astana talks; valuable activities of INGOs; and the CSSR approach to bringing the Syrian civil society into the peace process while

also strengthening its own network. Adaptive mediation could achieve a number of results. However, as the deterioration of the economic and social foundation resulting from more than ten years of protracted conflict continues, ineffective mediation efforts to only save lives are not enough for the Syrian people. When standard high-level international mediation efforts are ineffective, particularly during the stage when the dominant parties in the conflict and the direction of the ceasefire are unclear, the harm caused by the Syrian conflict to the general population can be mitigated through the coexistence of a combination of determined-designed and context-specific adaptive peace operations to support the resilience and self-organization of Syrian society. It is crucial that mediators make use of institutional learnings from both the positive results accumulated and the unsuccessful attempts of mediation during a decade of conflict and that the coherent international consensus which enables further adaptive mediation efforts is set up.

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