

Mediation in Syria - A comparative Analysis of the Astana and Geneva Processes

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Abstract

The mediation literature is replete with studies that summarize, analyze and assess different peacemaking efforts in Syria. The methodology has been either to provide an analysis of the initiatives, opportunities or challenges within a selected time period or to focus on the characteristics of a specific mediation framework. This paper adopts a comparative approach by examining and contrasting the UN-led Geneva process and the Astana framework on three key dimensions: inclusivity, leverage and strategy. The main difference between the two platforms has been the precedence given by the Astana framework to conflict management whereas the UN prioritized conflict resolution. The Astana talks included militarily relevant actors that provided leverage to dictate the conditions on the battlefronts. Nevertheless, the top-down approach adopted by the sponsors of Astana led to a lack of commitment and constructive participation from the Syrians. Overall, the Astana process succeeded in creating a rather frozen conflict situation in Syria. It is high time for the UN to build on this and formulate creative but realistic solutions that can pave the way for lasting peace.

Keywords: Astana; Conflict Resolution; Geneva; Mediation; Syrian Conflict

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Introduction

The Syrian civil war entered its tenth year in March 2021. For more than a decade, the country has been torn between the government led by President Bashar al-Assad and numerous armed militias supported by different regional and global powers. The destruction and violence caused by the war, together with human rights violations by the regime and extremist groups like Daesh, have taken a high toll. The conflict is estimated to have caused nearly half a million battle-related deaths and resulted in the displacement of more than half of the Syrian pre-war population (Asseburg, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2019; Lundgren, 2019).

Conflict resolution attempts to prevent, contain, reduce or end the violence in Syria started from the very beginning of the conflict. To avert a security and humanitarian crisis, the Arab League proposed peace plans at the end of 2011 without achieving considerable success (Lundgren, 2019). Due to internal disagreement on the fate of Assad – which would become a thread throughout all successive mediation attempts – they called upon the United Nations (UN) to take over (Lundgren, 2015; 2016; 2019). Since 2012, four UN special envoys, i.e., the UN mediators, have been in charge of coordinating international efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis. On a parallel track, since 2017, Russia, Iran and Turkey have engaged the Astana process to manage the conflict in line with their own national security interests.

The mediation literature is replete with studies that summarize, analyse and assess different peace-making efforts in Syria. The methodology has been either to provide an analysis of the initiatives, opportunities or challenges within a selected time period (Lundgren, 2016; 2019), or to focus on the characteristics of a specific mediation framework (Hill 2015; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Asseburg, 2018; Talukdar & Anas, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Abboud, 2021) or to delve into certain terms/concepts that relate to the mediation theory – consent (Hellmüller, 2021), ceasefires (Sosnowski, 2020), inclusion of civil society (Hellmüller & Zahar, 2019). This paper adopts a comparative approach by examining and contrasting the UN-led Geneva process and the Astana framework.

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The UN mediators are guided by the Geneva Communiqué (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2012) and the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which call for the cessation of violence, a political transition and the establishment of an inclusive government that would ‘exercise full executive powers’ (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2012). However, due to differentiating visions within the UNSC – in particular the US and Russia being at loggerheads on what a political transition in Syria should or would entail – no tangible progress has been made in realizing a ‘Syrian-led and owned’ political process (UN News, 2021a). As the room of manoeuvre for the UN mediators is essentially determined by the UNSC, the disagreement within that entity left them without any leverage to take coercive measures.

Unlike the UN-led Geneva process, the Astana framework has provided leverage in the mediation attempts primarily due to the military presence of the trio – Russia, Iran and Turkey – on the Syrian battlefield. Owing to this leverage, they were able to establish four de-escalation zones, provide relative stability in them and restrain the use of force by the conflicting sides (Lundgren, 2019). Nevertheless, the Astana process failed to achieve a durable peace in Syria and has been criticized by the international community for serving as a means to prolong the life of the Syrian regime (Asseburg, 2018; Lundgren, 2019; Interview Yüksel; Talukdar & Anas, 2018).

While no permanent solution has been found to the Syrian crisis, the mediation efforts achieved a certain level of success by enabling temporary ceasefires and providing conditions for the continuity of humanitarian assistance. Since 2019, the key negotiation platform has been the Constitutional Committee that is facilitated by the UN. The Committee consists of delegates representing the government, the opposition and the civil society as the third bloc. It aims to come up with a new constitution that is drafted by the Syrians. The sixth round of the negotiations of the Syrian Constitutional Committee was held in October 2021 without any agreement on the core principles or the way forward (UN News, 2021b).

The existence of two parallel tracks, Geneva and Astana, has been criticized by some for undermining and obstructing each other (Asseburg, 2018; Lundgren, 2019). Nevertheless, as

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witnessed in the creation of the Constitutional Committee, which originated in the talks of the Astana trio and was then facilitated by the UN special envoy, the two processes have also contributed to paving the way for achieving some common objectives. To assess whether the Astana trio's efforts undermine or advance the UN efforts, this study looks into the differences between the two processes. The paper is centred around the research question: **'How does the Astana process differ from the Geneva process and what lessons could be drawn from the Astana example to improve the effectiveness of the UN mediation?'**

The paper is structured as follows. First, it explains the concept of mediation in peace studies and details the main characteristics of successful mediation. Then, it develops a framework to use in the comparison of the Astana and Geneva processes. Here, the study relies on and extends the current research which provides several criteria to measure the effectiveness of international conflict mediation, and then utilizes three major attributes: leverage, inclusivity and strategy. The paper concludes by highlighting the key challenges awaiting the international community in finding a durable solution to the Syrian conflict and reflects on the potential lessons provided by the contrasting experiences of Astana and Geneva.

Mediation in Peace Research

Mediation is a technique for settling conflict – from neighbour fights to interstate war – that has been in use for ages. Since the Cold War, it has become a more prominent feature of international conflict management (Asseburg, 2018; Butler, 2009). Exemplifying this is the significant increase in the budget of the UN Department of Political Affairs, which handles most of the UN mediation efforts (Lundgren, 2016). But how can we define mediation and what exactly are the principles of effective mediation that can guarantee or predict a successful outcome? Unfortunately, there are no definitive responses to these questions. On the concept of mediation, there is not a single definition that scholars can agree upon.

This paper relies on the definition of Bercovitch, Anagnoson and Wille that understands mediation as 'a form of conflict management where disputants seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from an individual, a group, state, or organization to settle their conflict or

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resolve their differences without resorting to physical force' (1991, p. 8). Hence, mediation should be discerned from other forms of third-party involvement in conflicts because it does not rely on direct force and ideally demands the consent of the parties involved in the dispute (United Nations, 2012). It tries to come up with a solution that the conflicting parties cannot find on their own, by facilitating or improving communication (Kelman, 2007; Zartman, 1995a; Zartman & Touval, 2007). Mediation can take different forms depending on the mediator itself, the context of the conflict, the strategies deployed and the pre-set goals (Bercovitch, 1992).

Just as there is not one definition of mediation, there is not a single objective. One can distinguish between two broad strands: namely conflict management and conflict resolution. The first focuses on the cessation of violence, whereas the latter prioritizes finding political solutions that respond to the root causes of the conflict (Kelman, 2007; Bercovitch, 2011; Butler, 2009; Susskind & Babbit, 1992). Practically, without addressing the underlying problems that initiate violence, it is not easy to establish a durable peace. Strategies that concentrate on conflict management rather than conflict resolution risk creating protracted conflicts that last for generations (UN News, 2021c).

Most often, a peace agreement stipulates the cessation of violence and provides solutions for the roots of the conflict. Establishing such an agreement, however, is not an easy task. According to Zartman (1995b), it requires both a policy of recognition and a policy of dialogue adopted by the mediators: recognition in the sense that the conflicting parties need to recognize each other as legitimate actors to engage with each other, and a dialogue that seeks to address the root causes of the conflict.

Establishing a peace agreement is one thing, getting it implemented is another. A peace agreement might look very good on paper but when it is not applied on the ground or not adhered to, it is not very pertinent. This mostly happens in a complex and vulnerable context characterized by strong distrust and wariness among the warring parties. To make sure the conflicting parties do not resort to force again, the mediator must provide some guarantees to ensure adherence. These may involve the deployment of peacekeeping or third-party military troops or the enforcement of trade or economic sanctions (Bercovitch & Simpson, 2010).

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Considering the difficulty in achieving peace agreements and implementing them, how can we ensure that conflict resolution attempts restrain or end violence; deal with the root causes of the disputes; and pave the way for a peaceful future? How can we make sure mediation can play a role in responding to these challenges by applying a sensible set of criteria? More importantly, what are the key attributes of successful mediation?

Conditions for Effective Mediation

The assessment on the success of any mediation attempt is related to the expectations and objectives associated with the particular mediation mission (Bercovitch, 2011). When a complete resolution is expected, a conflict settlement or the cessation of violence might be considered as a failure. Susskind and Babbitt (1992) identify successful mediation as the cessation of violence, coming to an agreement with all parties, the implementation of the agreement and improved relations among the previously warring parties. In reality, it would be complicated to achieve even one of these four elements. The mediator's success in realizing all or a combination of them, nonetheless, will reduce the likelihood of a relapse into violence and ensure the sustainability of post-conflict peace.

In the evaluation of international conflict mediation, different criteria have been offered or utilized by the international organizations and the scholars of the field. The *UN Guidance for Effective Mediation* (2012) lists the following fundamentals to ensure effectiveness in mediation: 'preparedness; consent; impartiality; inclusivity; national ownership; international law and normative frameworks – the mandate; coherence, coordination and complementarity of the mediation effort; and quality peace agreements'. Bercovitch (1991) identifies the contextual variables of 'the nature of the parties; the nature of the dispute; and the nature of the mediator' and adds the process variable of 'strategies of mediation' as the determinants of fruitful mediation. Mancini and Vericat (2016) assess the effectiveness of UN mediation in Libya, Syria and Yemen based on the five key challenges faced by the mediators: 'mandate; impartiality and inclusivity; entry and consent; strategy; and leverage'. The same five features are utilized by Hinnebusch and Zartman (2016) in their analysis of the UN mediation in Syria during the terms of the first two UN special envoys: Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi. This

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paper builds on these dimensions, explores other factors such as the characteristics of the mediator, adds an analysis of the period under the leadership of the third and fourth UN envoys, Staffan de Mistura and Geir O. Pedersen, and examines the Astana process in comparison to the UN-led Geneva process.

The first attribute that affects mediation outcome is the **mandate** which embodies ‘the power or authority to perform various acts or duties’ given by the authorizing agency to the mediator (Nathan, 2018, p. 319). The mandate encompasses the goal of the mediating mission that has been set by the authorizing agency – and hence determines the room of manoeuvre of the mediator (United Nations, 2012; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). The UNSC, for example, prescribes the mandate for UN mediators and indicates which decisions or steps taken by the mediator will be supported (Butler, 2009).

The second feature is the **strategy**. Deciding on a strategy entails deciding on which course of action to follow to achieve the prescribed goal in the mandate. The strategy of a mediator often aims at either the cessation of violence – to facilitate trust-building – or to reach a peace agreement, as a means to stop the violence (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). The type of mediator – i.e., an individual, a state, or an international organization – may have an impact on the strategy adopted (Asseburg, 2018). A smaller state or organization will rely more on a bottom-up approach through establishing trust and enhancing the perceived impartiality at the local level. Big powers or organizations, on the other hand, will rely more on a top-down strategy by exerting international pressure (Asseburg, 2018).

The role of the mediator can also be examined under the dimension of strategy (Butler 2009). Zartman and Touval (1985) identify three distinct types of roles: communicator, formulator and manipulator, respectively ranging from passive to more active. The communicator role is concerned with facilitating communication through bringing parties together and planning interaction. A formulator goes further than this by controlling the information shared with the negotiating parties as well as the international media. A formulator is more active in redefining the situation by coming up with new solutions or formulations. The manipulator has the most active role as it entails a directive approach which leads the negotiations by filtering information

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and making substantive suggestions to shape and change the expectations of the parties involved (Zartman & Touval, 1985).

The roles in mediation and hence the strategy employed by the mediating party are not limited to the above-mentioned three types. Bercovitch (2011) mentions additional roles such as the bearer of bad news, translator, educator, resource expander, agent of reality and scapegoat. The role of bearer of bad news, for example, can be implemented in a passive way by simply transferring the difficult messages between the sides, or can happen in an active manner in which the mediator filters information, chooses messages to deliver and exerts pressure (Perez, 1959). Serving as a scapegoat makes it possible to lower the tensions by diverting blame that would have gone to the other warring party and augments the chances for the continuation of the talks between the different sides (Polley, 1989).

The third dimension is the initiation of mediation, which points to the **timing of mediation** efforts and relates to the consent given by the conflicting parties (Bercovitch, 2011; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). Bercovitch (2011) found that the ideal timing to initiate mediation is halfway through the lifecycle of a conflict. Zartman (1995a) mentions ripeness instead of timing. A conflict can be considered as 'ripe' when there is a mutually hurting stalemate that can be signalled by a bloody standoff leading to rising costs, the loss of foreign support, increasing foreign pressure, etc. This ripeness does not guarantee successful mediation, but it does guarantee an opening for a potential agreement to be established (Zartman, 1995a). A mutually hurting stalemate is seldom clearly perceived by the conflicting sides. Therefore, the mediator may need to raise awareness and convince the warring parties of the benefit of a peaceful mediated solution instead of a prolongation of violence that seeks an unrealizable one-sided victory (Zartman 1995a).

The decision to enter into negotiations and the consent or willingness to cooperate with the mediator increases the chances of achieving a more favourable outcome. Bercovitch (2011) found that mediation attempts were successful 62.3% of the time when mediation was requested as a voluntary process by both parties, whereas it was only successful 41.3% of the time when it was requested by only one party. Ideally, the mediator should seek a joint request/consent

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from both conflicting parties before initiating mediation (Bercovitch, 2011; Zartman, 1995a). A joint request, however, rarely happens. To bring the different parties to the table, some external pressure might be necessary.

This external pressure in mediation is known as **leverage**, i.e., the fourth dimension, and is the means of power or persuasion of a mediator. Zartman and Touval (1985) indicate two sources of leverage: power or persuasion, corresponding with Nye's (2004) distinction between hard and soft power. Reid (2017) develops this further by renaming these two sources of leverage as capability leverage and credibility leverage.

Capability leverage is associated with the hard power or coercion the mediator could apply in order to 'alter the costs of non-agreement and expand the number of mutually acceptable alternatives to fighting' (Reid, 2017, p. 10). Credibility leverage, on the other hand, consists of three components: historical ties, cultural ties and offering post-agreement monitoring – and as such corresponds with soft power or persuasion (Reid, 2017). Capability leverage can contribute to short-term success by increasing the cost of non-compliance whereas credibility leverage alters the incentives for compliance and thereby may lead to a more durable peace (Reid, 2017). In addition, exercising capability leverage is often at odds with the perceived neutrality of a mediator and can lead to resentment or disengagement (Asseburg, 2018; Zartman & Touval, 1985). This can create perceptions of lacking in **impartiality**, the fifth key challenge that affects mediation outcome.

Being **impartial** implies being neutral or without having any stake in the continuation of violence. Yet, being impartial should not serve as a prerequisite for all mediation attempts. In some circumstances, having an appetite for involvement and an interest in mediation can increase the likelihood of success. It might increase the motivation and the commitment of the mediating party to the process and the outcome (Butler, 2009; Clayton & Gleditsch, 2014; Zartman & Touval, 1985). Reid (2017) confirms that biased mediators are more effective than unbiased ones. In civil wars, biased mediators can strengthen the position of the weakening side and enhance commitment to conflict resolution attempts. According to Svensson (2007), this

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has particularly been the case for mediations that favour the government side, whereas no similar impact is found in opposition- or rebel-biased mediations.

Independent of the inclination for or against a particular party or position, it is necessary for the mediator to demonstrate a level of perceived impartiality. In the end, the mediating party should generate an outcome that is acceptable to all sides of the conflict (Zartman & Touval, 1985). The mediator should prioritize managing the conflict or settling the disputes over realizing its own interests. By demonstrating technical impartiality, mediators can come up with solutions that are acceptable to all conflicting parties without leading to a definitive gain or victory for one of the sides (Butler, 2009).

Inclusivity is one other key factor that influences mediation outcome. It deals with the questions of who should be represented in and who should be excluded from the peace talks. The mediating party has a key role in decisions about representation at the negotiation tables, however, due to the highly internationalized nature of contemporary conflicts, unilateral decisions are increasingly becoming rare (United Nations General Assembly, 2012). The international organizations and the UNSC have a dominant position in the choices about inclusion. Likewise, regional powers and external patrons that have intervened and supported local parties in the conflict influence the setup at the negotiation tables (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Zartman, 1995b).

The scholarly debate is inconclusive on which kind of actors should be involved for concluding peaceful solutions. Some argue for only including a limited set of local actors since having too many actors with diverging interests may lead to an impasse at the negotiation tables (Asseburg, 2018; Bercovitch, 2005). By contrast, others contend that inclusive mediation has a higher likelihood of success (Zartman, 1995b; Cengiz, 2020). An inclusive process is believed to have higher chances of identifying and addressing the root causes of the conflict and satisfying the demands of all segments of the population that is affected by the violence (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

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A critical challenge for inclusion is to decide which local actors to invite to the negotiations. Military strength or relevance is an important determinant since the mediation process is highly influenced by the realities on the battle fronts (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Lundgren, 2016). Yet, judgements based solely on military strength can be misleading and unfair. They could signal that violence pays off and risk ruling out major stakeholders without weapons. Moreover, the groups that take up arms do not necessarily prioritize responding to the legitimate claims or needs of the wider population. The involvement of civil society is therefore crucial. It provides the internal legitimacy by representing a broader section of the population, which often leads to the international legitimacy of the mediation process itself (United Nations General Assembly, 2012).

The rise of extremist or terrorist groups is also complicating the decisions on inclusion. The international community mostly holds on to its policy of non-engagement with radical or terrorist groups even though they are often relevant military actors. Their exclusion from negotiations has the potential to produce resentment and resistance against any established peace agreement or ceasefire (Asseburg, 2018; Simons, 2021; Zartman, 1995b).

In addition to the above-mentioned six important dimensions that determine the success of mediation, other parameters such as conflict intensity; disunity within the opposition; the ethnic, sectarian or religious identities of the conflicting parties; and the conflict issues or incompatibilities play a determinant role in the success of the mediation processes and outcomes (Bercovitch, 2011; Clayton & Gleditsch, 2014). Nevertheless, as Clayton and Gleditsch contend, ‘peace agreements are often attributed to the tireless efforts of diligent mediators [...] rather than the structural conditions that facilitated the onset of the process’ (2014, p. 279). Structural factors might shape the willingness to participate in mediation but the personality and the skills of the mediating party as well as the strategy and resources it utilizes play a vital role in influencing mediation outcomes (Clayton & Gleditsch, 2014).

This brings us a final dimension to assess mediation efforts: the **mediator itself**. The mediator must have a certain set of skills and commitment to ensure effective mediation (Zartman, 1995b). In addition to knowledge about conflict and an ability to comprehend the positions of

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the main antagonists, several other attributes are identified as ideal for a mediator to possess such as active listening; communication and procedural skills; intelligence; a sense of humour; trust; credibility; and crisis management skills (Wehr, 1979; Bercovitch, 1991; Bercovitch & Houston, 2011). Bercovitch (2011) highlights the importance of a mediator's rank as he argues that the higher the rank, the more potential leverage a mediator can exert. While all these attributes are important, what ultimately influence the success or failure of a particular mediation attempt are the conflicting parties' acceptance of mediation and their commitment to reaching an agreement (United Nations, 2012).

Mediation in the Syrian Crisis

The Syrian civil war proved to be an extremely difficult conflict to mediate: a fractured opposition with leaders in exile, highly internationalized characteristics of the conflict with the armed intervention of several regional and global powers, and the deepening sectarian divides which have impeded constructive talks between the warring sides (Lundgren, 2015; Asseburg, 2018). The original peace initiative of the Arab League did not last long. At present, the diplomatic track to resolve the Syrian crisis follows two major paths: one led by the UN and the other by the trio of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

The **Geneva** process is the name for all the UN-mediation attempts since 2012. Initially, due to the antagonism against the Syrian regime shared by the Western and Arab countries as well as Turkey, the peace talks dictated one essential condition: the removal of Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian President. Despite his reputation as a skilled and experienced diplomat, Kofi Annan, the first UN mediator, was viewed by the Syrian government as impartial. What contributed more to the distrust of the pro-regime camp was the non-inclusion of Iran in the Geneva peace negotiations.

Additionally, the conflict was not yet considered ripe when Annan started his mediation efforts in February 2012. As a matter of fact, a mutually hurting stalemate has never fully occurred during the civil war. The Syrian regime maintained its position to view all opposition as terrorists that needed to be defeated. When Damascus lacked the resources to fight, it received

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support from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. The opposition, on the other hand, has long insisted on the removal of Assad and on the fulfilment of a political transition. It held onto optimism around a military victory (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). The UN's strategy especially during the terms of the second and third special envoys, Brahimi and de Mistura, focused on ripening perceptions of a mutually hurting stalemate, but to no avail. Both envoys also tried to enforce some leverage by trying to create unity in the international community and specifically between the US and Russia (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). Nevertheless, these efforts made little progress, resulting in the resignation of both Brahimi and de Mistura, following in the footsteps of the former UN mediator, Kofi Annan.

Following its heavy military involvement in the Syrian conflict after September 2015, Russia initiated the parallel track of **Astana** – together with the two other major armed actors, Iran and Turkey – because of its dissatisfaction with the UN process and its willingness to lead the diplomatic efforts. Initially, the Astana process focused primarily on establishing ceasefires and resolving the disputes on the battleground. Increasingly, it became a political platform that tried to bring together the regime and selected opposition groups. Ankara's support for the process has curtailed the doubts and distrust among the Syrian opposition towards the pro-regime camp, Russia and Iran in particular. Despite the criticism about contradicting or derailing the Geneva process, the Astana trio insist on the fact that they are guided by the same UN documents, i.e., the Geneva Communiqué and the UNSC Resolution 2254.

How exactly does the Astana process differ from the UN-led mediation framework? In what ways has it produced more concrete, favourable or unfavourable results in resolving the conflict or settling the disputes? Among the seven criteria listed in the literature review, **inclusivity**, **leverage and strategy** have been the most significant factors that created differences in the processes and outcome of the Geneva and Astana frameworks. The impacts of **mandate and the mediator characteristics** have become visible in the capability leverage and strategies of the mediators whereas the attribute of **impartiality** has been linked to the credibility leverage enjoyed by the mediators. The two negotiation tracks have not differed significantly in terms

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of the **ripeness of the conditions** as well as the consent voluntarily given by the negotiating parties to the mediators.

In the Geneva and Astana peace initiatives, different actors are represented at the diplomatic tables, creating differences on **inclusivity**. As Astana is organized by the three most relevant external military actors, they are able to exert **leverage** on the conflicting parties. The UN mediation, on the other side, has only a limited UNSC mandate, restricting the leverage that can be employed by the mediators. Lastly, **strategies** adopted in the two mediation platforms are not the same. The Geneva process has focused more on the political issues and has sought to address the root causes of the conflict whereas the Astana process has prioritized conflict management by creating de-escalation areas and security zones.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is all about who gets to sit at the negotiation table. Ideally, the mediator who is assigned to find a peaceful solution should determine who needs to be included or excluded. In reality, however, this is prone to political cherry-picking, interference from third parties and reconciliation of interests (United Nations General Assembly, 2012). It is critical for the mediating party to involve relevant local, regional and international actors without overloading the process and complicating decision making. Research has suggested that a higher inclusivity has a higher probability of success (Cengiz, 2020). Yet, a higher inclusivity brings the challenge of reconciling divergent interests, restraining possible spoilers, and demonstrating creativity in the formulation of common principles or positions that actors at three different levels can agree on: international, regional and local (Bercovitch, 2005).

The International Level

In the Syrian conflict, the organizing actor of the Geneva process, the UN, receives its mandate from the UNSC. Despite the presence of regime supporters Russia and China in the UNSC, the Geneva process is predominantly perceived as a Western-led process (Asseburg, 2018). Basing their political propaganda on anti-Westernism, challenging the dominance of the West in international diplomacy and more importantly, realizing the ineffectiveness of the Western-led

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efforts in dealing with the Syrian crisis, Russia, Iran and Turkey started and pursued their own diplomatic track, the Astana process, in 2017.

Despite the trio's denial of having ulterior motives, the Astana framework has largely been considered as a way for Moscow to circumvent the UN and the US in steering the political process in Syria (Asseburg, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Lundgren, 2019; Simons, 2021; Talukdar & Anas, 2018; Thépaut, 2020). To address criticism on this topic, Russia extended the invitation to the US and the UN. The US has participated in an observer status, the UN mediators have been represented, and they have consulted the organizing actors both separately and collectively (Lundgren, 2019). Moreover, the Astana process has confirmed its commitment to the Geneva Communiqué and UNSC Resolution 2254, the guiding documents for UN mediation, to enhance a 'Syrian-led and Syrian-owned' political transition (United Nations General Assembly of the Security Council, 2012; Cengiz, 2020; Talukdar & Anas, 2018).

At the international level, the Astana framework was more effective in satisfying the demands of the key conflicting parties and stakeholders. From the opposition's angle, lacking the required Western support to defeat Assad, Astana gave them a chance to remain relevant despite the military losses. On the side of Damascus, the process created an opportunity to reclaim credibility in the eyes of the international community and to demonstrate its willingness to become part of a political solution. Finally, in the view of guarantors, the trio, Astana provided the means to increase leverage, strengthen their position at the negotiation table and to prove to the international community that they were the only ones who could curtail the violence in Syria (Cengiz, 2020).

The Regional Level

If military relevance would be the criterium to decide who gets to participate in mediation, the Astana process would score better theoretically than the process of Geneva. Initially, Iran, a key supporter of the regime, was excluded from the Geneva talks, as was Saudi Arabia, a leading funder of the armed opposition. Being a close ally of the Syrian regime and exerting significant influence on decision making in Damascus, Iran had no incentive to comply with

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something that it did not work on or agree with (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Lundgren, 2016). Recognizing the mistake in the exclusion of a crucial regional actor, the UN eventually invited Iran to the Geneva talks and opened up room for the inclusion of Saudi Arabia, which had been linked to Iran's exclusion in the first place.

In its selection concerning involvement of regional actors, Russia considered military relevance and boots on the ground as the primary condition in the Astana framework. By inviting both Tehran and Ankara, Moscow aspired to reflect an image of a neutral mediating party despite its strong support in favour of the Syrian regime. It was in Russia's interest to portray its efforts as having all the good intention to balance the demands from the two major conflicting parties, the regime and the opposition. Instead of directly engaging with the conflicting parties, Moscow preferred a framework that put Tehran and Ankara at the negotiating table. Together with Hezbollah, Iran played a critical role in keeping Assad in power. Inviting Turkey and giving it a crucial role ensured the participation of a broader camp of oppositional armed groups and caused the mediation process to be perceived as less biased (Cengiz, 2020; Dalay, 2021). It also enabled Russia to delegate all the troubles to Turkey concerning the necessity to deal with the radical groups in north-western Syria.

The Local Level

Including the relevant parties at the local level proved difficult due to the fragmentation of the opposition, a lack of civil society representation and the existence of several terrorist organizations. Additionally, an initial problem of the UN-led mediation was the inability to include government representatives in the negotiations due to international community's initial insistence on a political transition. In the Astana process, the regime was evidently included from the start and the opposition increasingly became more united with Turkey's enhanced role in becoming the opposition's main patron.

Within the framework of the Geneva process, UN mediators tried different strategies to respond to the fractured nature of the Syrian opposition. They encouraged the establishment of umbrella organizations for the opposition to channel their demands through, such as the National

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Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SNC) and the High Negotiations Committee (HNC). While these organizations usually received legitimacy from abroad, they did not have much relevance among the Syrian population (Cengiz, 2020; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016). They were composed of leaders who lived abroad and thus were not representative of the armed groups that continued fighting on Syrian soil. Moreover, there was a hesitation on the UN side about including Salafist groups that were not labelled as terrorists but were approached with caution due to their fundamentalist religious views.

The Astana process, on the other side, prioritized military relevance when it came to representation of the opposition. In the view of Cengiz, Astana managed to ‘bring together the oppositional figures fighting on the ground, rather than actors from outside the area who are detached from the realities on the ground’ (2020, p. 11). In the later stages of the civil war and particularly after its first military intervention on Syrian soil in August 2016, Ankara became the main actor in organizing both the political and the military structure of the Syrian opposition, hence its inclusion in the Astana talks. Moreover, the Astana framework has enjoyed a wider participation and involved key actors among the armed opposition – including the militarily important Salafist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam (Stepanova, 2018; Lundgren, 2019).

In both Geneva and Astana, a major problem was the definition of terrorism and decisions of the inclusion or exclusion of selected armed groups that were labelled as terrorists by one or more actors. There was not much controversy about the exclusion of internationally recognized terrorist groups such as Daesh or Al-Nusra. A challenge was dealing with the offspring of Al-Nusra, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which broke its alliance with Al-Qaeda. The Astana process delegated to Turkey the mission to deal with and deradicalize this group. On the other side, the West – the US in particular – has started reconsidering its approach to grapple with this strongest rebel group of the Idlib province (Khalifa & Bonsey, 2021).

Concerning the other groups that are not universally accepted as terrorists, who falls under the label of terrorist is controversial and arbitrary (Lundgren, 2019). The regime, on the one side of the pendulum, considers all oppositional groupings as terrorists, creating doubts about its

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sincerity to continue engagement with them in the constitution-writing process. On the other side, Ankara labels the key Kurdish group as terrorist and prevents their participation in the talks in Geneva and Astana. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG) are all seen as offshoots of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and hence considered as terrorists by Turkey. Under the umbrellas of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the PYD and the YPG exert political and military control over a large part of north-eastern Syrian territory. Their exclusion from the negotiation processes plays a detrimental role in ensuring inclusive and comprehensive solutions to the Syrian crisis.

Finally, on the subject of civil society representation, both Geneva and Astana have largely failed. In the build-up of the Geneva Communiqué, civil society representation was considered (United Nations General Assembly, 2012; Helmüller & Zahar, 2019). During the terms of the first two envoys, civil society representatives were consulted but they were not invited to participate in formal negotiations. It was only under de Mistura, the third UN mediator, that their participation became institutionalized and formalized (Asseburg, 2018; Helmüller & Zahar, 2019). The fourth UN special envoy for Syria, Geir O. Pedersen, enhanced engagement with civil society representatives and placed particular importance on the participation of women to take part in shaping Syria's future (Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria (OSES), 2021).

There is no direct civil society representation in the Astana process. The trio has not demonstrated any open willingness or expressed any clear statement on their inclusion in the negotiations. The Constitutional Committee, which initially stemmed from a Russian initiative and was then taken over by the UN, has 50 representatives from civil society. The members of this so-called third bloc, however, cannot be considered as fully neutral. Somewhat indirectly, the Astana trio and Damascus play a key role in the selection of these members as well as the messages they carry in the constitution-writing talks (Hauch, 2020; Lundgren, 2019).

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Leverage

Leverage is about the capacity to create persuasion or pressure to shape a political reality. In mediation literature, it entails leading the process in line with the interest or the position of a particular party (Zartman & Touval, 1985). In the Syrian conflict, among the two major mediation frameworks, Astana has enjoyed sufficient leverage to achieve the cessation of violence, create de-escalation zones and hinder a relapse into large-scale violence. What the Astana trio's capability leverage could not accomplish was the realization of a durable peace by responding to the political and socioeconomic grievances of the Syrian people, primarily the anti-Assad camp. When it comes to the UN side, due to the disunity at the UNSC level, the mediators had no capability leverage and were not able to adopt coercive measures (Asseburg, 2018; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Interviews Yüksel and Zartman; Lundgren, 2019). Such coercive measures could take the form of sanctions, the establishment of no-fly or safe zones, a broad arms embargo, and prosecution of war crimes or crimes against humanity, thereby pressuring the conflicting parties to make concessions at the negotiation table (Asseburg, 2018).

In terms of credibility leverage, the Astana guarantors were considered as credible only by the parties they were sponsoring, with the opposition trusting Turkey and Damascus having faith in Iran and Russia. The UN mediators appeared to be in a more favourable position in terms of credibility due to their experience as renowned diplomats. Nevertheless, this was not how the main negotiating parties perceived the situation. The Syrian regime was suspicious of the UN mediation especially during the terms of the first two envoys when there was a demand from the international community for Assad to step down. The opposition became more wary about the mediations under de Mistura and Pedersen who have both viewed cooperation with Moscow and directly or indirectly with Damascus essential to proceed in conflict settlement.

Deprived of both capability and credibility leverage, the UN mediation under de Mistura and Pedersen prioritized technical improvements such as establishing local ceasefires, facilitating humanitarian access and proceeding with a constitution-writing process. Owing to its capability leverage, the Astana trio defined the rules on the battlefield and ended large-scale bloodshed. Lacking trust by the opposing camp and in order to appear credible, the Astana trio

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complemented the UN efforts to ensure the non-closure of humanitarian corridors. That is also the reason for them to support the continuation of the works of the Constitutional Committee. Nevertheless, trust or credibility leverage remains to be a key challenge for the Astana framework. Damascus does not trust Ankara and the opposition is suspicious of the motives of Moscow and Tehran. In other words, the impartiality of the sponsors of the Astana process is highly questionable.

Problems associated with impartiality, however, does not reduce the effectiveness of the Astana framework. First of all, capability leverage and the ability to influence the behaviours of the conflicting parties have proved to be a more important asset for the Astana trio than their neutrality (Wallensteen and Svensson, 2014). Second, the trio convinced the conflicting sides to proceed with the negotiations. Russia delivered Damascus and Turkey delivered the opposition to the negotiation table without creating an image of ‘selling an agreement’ that favoured their friends (Zartman, 1995a). Finally, the Astana trio has placed less emphasis on liberal issues and cared less about being perceived as impartial. Their primary concern was responding to the more urgent issues on the battleground, namely the cessation of the violence and the normalization of life in the ceasefire areas. This does not mean that Astana has a better chance of providing a durable peace to the Syrians. Instead, the trio adopted a strategy which was ‘more attuned to political realities in Syria, warts and all’ (Lundgren, 2019, p.15).

Strategy

In both mediation processes, there was an overreliance on a top-down strategy. A top-down strategy is more often pursued by big powers or organizations as they use their diplomatic, political, economic or military capabilities to exert international pressure. Smaller powers or organizations, contrastingly, are more likely to use a bottom-up approach by establishing trust at the local level as a solid basis for brokering a ceasefire or a peace agreement (Asseburg, 2018).

The top-down approach of both Geneva and Astana prioritized the cessation of violence as a condition to bring together the regime and opposition in line with the desired end state

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envisioned by the mediating side. The UN mediators hoped that ceasefires could prevent deepening sectarian animosities in the short run, paving the way for building trust and continuing constructive engagement in order to achieve a political transition in Syria (Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016; Lundgren, 2016). The Astana trio, on the other side, aimed to produce a ceasefire that could actually hold by clearly delineating the opposition armed groups and the pro-regime fighters (Stepanova, 2018). They established de-escalation zones and created a ‘no war and no peace’ environment in Syria (Younes, 2019). As a matter of fact, the emergence of a frozen conflict situation satisfied the interests of not only the Astana sponsors but also the main antagonists of the Syrian civil war – the regime and the opposition armed groups.

On the regime’s side, the existence of pockets of territories which are under the rule of Turkish-backed opposition or the Kurdish-led AANES provide a constant mobilization topic around a national cause to retain public support and to justify recruitment and training of the military in order to reclaim full sovereignty over Syria. For the opposition, the liberated territories have given them regions to administer – albeit with extensive external support – and the longer the stalemate continues, the closer they get to the unrecognized partition of the country. The frozen state of the Syrian conflict, in Zartman’s words, has become a ‘stable, viable, bearable compromise rather than a constraining burden that forces both sides to negotiation’ (1995a).

While the Geneva Communiqué and Resolution 2254 called for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process, this was not much reflected in the UN’s mediation attempts (United Nations General Assembly Security Council, 2012). The first two envoys gave precedence to engagement with the international and regional powers in establishing a nationwide ceasefire. Under his term, de Mistura attempted to broker local ceasefires instead of imposing a top-down national ceasefire in the hope that this could be more realistic and would aid in confidence building at the local level (Lundgren, 2015; 2016). To ensure the continuation of these local ceasefires, limited cooperation among the warring parties emerged, but due to the lack of external monitors and the incapacity of internal actors to cease the fighting, the positive trend did not endure (Lundgren, 2015). Hence, the special envoys had to rely again on the military

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powers and the Astana trio in containing violence in a top-down manner (Asseburg, 2018; Lundgren, 2015; 2016; 2019; Hinnebusch & Zartman, 2016).

Different from the Geneva process, the Astana framework did not prioritize finding a political solution to the Syrian civil war. It has mostly served as a platform for resolving problems on the battleground and for steering the situation in line with the interests of the Astana trio (Asseburg, 2018). The de-escalation regime created by Russia, Turkey and Iran allowed the Syrian regime to strengthen its military position and expand its territorial control in the country. Moreover, Moscow achieved pushing forward topics like elections and constitution writing, replacing the precedence given to political transition or the establishment of a new representative government. In other words, the Astana process legitimized Assad and suppressed questions about his right to rule the Syrians.

The parallel tracks of Astana and Geneva have also differed on the role of mediators as well as on the type of mediating actors. The UN mediators, de Mistura and Pedersen in particular, have played the role of communication facilitator by contacting the parties; arranging interactions and transmitting messages between them; and creating a platform that allows the conflicting sides to elaborate on their interests and positions. Likewise, in the constitution writing process that has involved both governmental and opposition representatives, the UN's role has also been mostly procedural, seeking facilitation rather than formulation of the content. The Astana framework, however, has both been formulative and manipulative in character. The trio in general and Russia in particular have been able to define the agenda; control the timing, pace, formality and physical environment of the meetings; adding incentives; pressing the parties to make concessions or to show flexibility; and keeping the process focused on the issues determined by the sponsors (Beardsley, Quinn, Biswas & Wilkenfeld, 2006, p.66).

Finally, on the mediators themselves, major decisions in the Astana process were taken and announced by the leaders of the three sponsor countries, Russia, Iran and Turkey. With the main issues concerning mostly northern Syria in the last couple of years, it has been primarily Putin and Erdoğan who have called each other or met in person in order to call the shots and define the framework of the peace talks in Astana. In the Geneva process, the UN mediators have been

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top diplomats with substantial international experience. By selecting renowned and highly skilled diplomats, the UN hoped to achieve impartiality and effectiveness to resolve the Syrian civil war which was highly sectarian in character. Nevertheless, lacking external leverage and as a result of the disunity within the UNSC, three UN mediators had to resign, leaving the fourth one, Geir Pedersen, in a rather procedural role to carry on with the drafting of the new Syrian constitution.

Geneva vs. Astana?

The creation of the parallel track of Astana evidently added complexity and coordination problems for the mediation attempts. The Astana guarantors argue that they do not have the intention to create duplication or confrontation with the UN-led Geneva process (Asseburg, 2018; Cengiz, 2020; Interview Hiltermann; Lundgren, 2019; Talukdar & Anas, 2018). They highlight the fact that the Astana process is also guided by the same principles outlined in the core documents: the Geneva Communiqué and UNSC Resolution 2254.

Contrary to the claims of the Astana trio, there are doubts about the complementary aspect of the Astana framework, regarded by some as an alternative or competitive diplomatic track that tries to undermine the Geneva process (Asseburg, 2018; Dalay 2018). It cannot be denied that the Astana trio is focused on carving out spheres of influence and establishing de facto borders in north and eastern Syria rather than formulating policy proposals that could lead the way towards a democratic transition (Interview Hiltermann). The creation of de-escalation zones proved helpful in containing violence but as Dalay (2018) emphasizes, the establishment of these areas were a 'done deal' and was neither discussed nor approved by the UN. The de-escalation zones allowed the regime to use its force more efficiently and eventually Damascus recaptured three out of four while expanding its territorial control in the fourth, in Idlib. The establishment of these zones was not geared towards the broader conflict resolution in the war-torn Syria and hence did not contribute to it (Dalay, 2018; 2021; Lundgren, 2019; Thépaut, 2020).

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The Astana trio avoided extensive discussions about a political transition or the creation of a transitional body. For Russia and Iran, demanding such a transition implied toppling the Syrian government and creating chaos and fragility. The initial international and hence UN insistence on Assad's removal led to an impasse because 'one cannot mediate a suicide' (Quote Interview Zartman). With Damascus gaining the upper hand on the battleground, and realizing the futility in persisting towards regime change, de Mistura refrained from explicitly using the word 'transition'. Instead, he referred to the text of the Geneva Communique or the UNSC Resolution 2254 (Collins & Tahhan, 2017; Interview Zartman; United Nations Security Council, 2015). Following in the footsteps of de Mistura, Pedersen has followed a similar approach and has prioritized progressing on constitution writing in collaboration with the major stakeholders and the Astana trio.

A positive aspect of Astana has been bringing Turkey, Russia and Iran together around a table despite their divergent interests in Syria. The process proved that mediation attempts can produce some results if there is an understanding among the key regional or relevant powers (Cengiz, 2020). Furthermore, despite not coming up with a tangible political solution, the Astana process has held the topic of constitution revision on the table and facilitated later efforts of the UN mediator to lead this process (Lundgren, 2019). Neither of the mediation processes has succeeded in progressing in drafting a new Syrian constitution, but the ongoing talks continue to provide a procedural framework to guide interaction (Interviews Barkey and Hiltermann; Lundgren, 2019).

Despite its certain achievements, the Astana process is not likely to establish a sustainable peace in Syria. It is ill-equipped to address the dire socio-economic conditions in Syria (Kizilkaya, Hamdi & Salman, 2021). The deteriorating economic situation has the potential to catalyse extremism, create additional refugee flows and hence cause regional instability. The Astana trio lacks the resources to respond to these challenges, to rebuild Syria and to achieve reconciliation among the Syrian population who are divided along ethnic and sectarian lines. Therefore, in spite of the disappointments in finding common grounds on the drafting of the constitution or

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on other humanitarian or political issues, it is still critical to keep the Geneva format in place (Interview Zartman; Köstem, 2020).

Conclusion

The Geneva and Astana processes are the two primary diplomatic tracks geared at ending violence and finding a peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis. Both have realized some accomplishments such as providing temporary ceasefires, ensuring the continuation of humanitarian assistance and enabling medical evacuations. The main difference between the two frameworks has been the precedence given by the Astana trio on conflict management whereas at least on paper, the UN has been determined to resolve the conflict and establish a durable peace.

This paper highlighted other differences on three attributes: inclusivity, leverage and strategy. On inclusion, the Astana talks included actors, both local and regional, who have been more relevant militarily speaking. This hard power dimension has also provided leverage to the Astana trio to dictate the conditions on the battle fronts and to create de facto borders which separate the regions controlled by the regime, the opposition and the AANES. The exclusion of the PYD from the talks, due to Ankara's insistence, did not prevent Russia and Turkey from coordinating military developments in the north and east of Syrian soil. Nevertheless, it added an extra layer of complexity to the international community's efforts to resolve the conflict and achieve reconciliation.

In stopping the bloodshed and creating relative safety in the de-escalation zones, the Astana framework achieved considerable success, offering several lessons to learn for a more effective UN mediation in the future. First of all, the UN needs to enhance its capability **leverage** in order to remain credible in conflict resolution. Without formulating a clear mandate and strengthening the hands of its mediators by substantial external leverage, the UN mediation may become sidelined by alternative frameworks as seen in the Astana example in the Syrian conflict. Second, when the opposition is fractured and does not have a clear and strong representative, mediation **strategies** should not be fixated on regime change. Likewise, **strategies** that seek

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transcending incompatibilities and addressing the root causes of the conflict are idealistic aspirations which may prove unrealistic in actual situations. It is true that without establishing positive peace, a relapse into violence is highly likely. Nevertheless, as witnessed in the Syrian case, more than anything else, civil wars necessitate ceasefires which end the bloodshed and the corresponding human suffering.

Finally, on the dimension of **inclusion**, the UN has to define more precise conditions when involving the relevant military actors. It cannot be denied that including too many actors – regional powers, spoilers, radical or extremist groups – may hamper mediation efforts. Wider participation, however, may also bring about positive results as seen in the favourable outcome of the Astana talks in calming the situation in the frontlines. Just as importantly, Russia's move to delegate Turkey the responsibility to deal with the armed opposition – including the engagement with the Salafist groups as well as the task to clear and deradicalize the extremists in the Idlib province – offers useful lessons to learn from when coping with the militarily relevant radical or terrorist groups in civil war mediation.

Since 2017, the capability leverage imposed by the Astana trio, Russia in particular, has been a key determinant of the mediation strategies that have been adopted. The top-down approach in announcing ceasefires or creating de-escalation zones resulted in diplomatic negotiations which were orchestrated in the capitals of Moscow, Ankara or Tehran, leaving little room of freedom for the main conflicting parties of the civil war. Decisions about the date, location and content of the peace talks were all imposed top-down, leading to a lack of commitment and constructive participation from the Syrians themselves.

The UN attempts particularly under the fourth envoy, Geir Pedersen, have tried to address this gap and involve civil society and women in a more active manner in the peace negotiations. This bottom-up involvement was perhaps not that crucial when the fighting was intense, necessitating instead an emphasis on the cessation of violence. Nevertheless, as the battle fronts have become relatively calm in the last couple of years, engaging civil society becomes much more critical to achieve an inclusive peace. Establishing a durable and positive peace is not an easy task. Nevertheless, the UN remains the primary actor that can accomplish this. The Astana

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trio succeeded in creating a rather frozen conflict situation in Syria. It is high time for the UN to build on this and formulate creative but realistic solutions that can pave the way for a lasting peace.

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