

# Time to change track

Assessing the UN's conflict mediation strategy for Syria from 2019 to 2023

CRU Report

Malik al-Abdeh  
Lars Hauch



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations



# Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

## **Time to change track**

Assessing the UN's conflict mediation strategy for Syria from 2019 to 2023

Malik al-Abdeh

Lars Hauch

CRU Report

July 2023



## **About the authors**

**Malik al-Abdeh** Malik al-Abdeh is managing director of Conflict Mediation Solutions, a Track II consultancy. Previously, he was a consultant at the Humanitarian Dialogue Centre and program manager at the European Institute of Peace. He is based in London.

**Lars Hauch** is a researcher and policy advisor at Conflict Mediation Solutions. Before, he worked as independent researcher and consultant for various humanitarian organizations, security companies and political consultancies. His analyses of non-state armed groups, humanitarian responses and political dynamics in Syria and the region have appeared in numerous publications.

# Contents

Executive summary	1
1 Introduction	2
2 Constraining factors and sources of influence	4
3 Evolution of the OSE's Syria strategy 2019–2023	7
3.1 Creating a safe, calm and neutral environment	8
3.2 Achieving progress on the fate of detainees, abductees and missing persons	11
3.3 Involving a wide range of Syrians	15
3.4 Convening the Constitutional Committee	19
3.5 Step-for-step diplomacy	22
4 Spotlight on current dynamics	25
5 Conclusion	31

# Executive summary

The United Nations has become largely irrelevant to diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syria conflict. The UN-sponsored Constitutional Committee remains dysfunctional and the UN Special Envoy for Syria – Geir Pedersen – was neither invited nor granted an observatory role in recent initiatives such as the evolved Astana track or the Amman process. Of the five goals the Special Envoy set himself at the beginning of his term in 2019, two have been achieved, though largely in the instrumental sense: the Constitutional Committee was convened, and a wide range of Syrians have been engaged. No progress has been made on the three remaining goals: the release of detainees and clarification of the fate of abductees and missing persons; starting sustained dialogue with the Assad regime and the opposition about building trust and confidence needed to establish a safe, calm and neutral environment; and making headway on international convergence towards a credible and sustainable settlement. How did the UN get to this point and what should be done about it?

This report shows that the primary reason has been the fact that the main conflict parties never wanted to resolve the Syrian conflict by other than military means. Yet, the report also highlights secondary reasons within this unfavourable context, namely: the frames, methods and choices of the Envoy and his team at times misjudged or poorly corresponded with the realities of the conflict. Moreover, the capacity of the Office of the Special Envoy (OSE) remained too limited.

As conflict *resolution* is no longer within reach and the Envoy's 'step-for-step' diplomacy has had limited traction, it is time to shift the UN's focus to conflict *management* with the aim of creating a holding space for renewed conflict resolution efforts when the time is ripe(r) and to keep UNSCR 2254 on the international radar. This requires the OSE to reinvent itself as a principled thought leader and to develop an operational framework for the creation of a safe, calm and neutral environment (SCNE). As a starting point, such a process should engage with all the authorities of Syria's competing areas of control instead of just with the Assad regime and external powers. A clear SCNE framework can smooth the rough edges of a poor conflict situation by improving trade, mobility and investment across lines of control. This can bring relief to Syrians in the short term, encourage more realistic regional diplomatic initiatives and, perhaps, lay the foundation to advance a comprehensive political process in the future.

# 1 Introduction

A recent series of political developments regarding Syria has exposed a growing problem in international diplomacy: the United Nations (UN) has ceased to be a focal point for managing and resolving the decade-long conflict.<sup>1</sup> In both the quadripartite process between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the Assad regime that culminated in a meeting of the countries' foreign ministers in Moscow on 10 May 2023,<sup>2</sup> and the Arab-led Amman initiative that set the stage for the readmission of the Assad regime into the Arab League on 7 March 2023,<sup>3</sup> the UN and its Special Envoy for Syria found themselves at the sidelines. In fact, the UN was not even granted an observer role in Moscow or Amman, despite the Special Envoy being mandated by the UN Security Council (UNSC) to take the lead in facilitating negotiations.

During the current Special Envoy's – Geir Pederson's – four-year term, the political process has made even less use of the UN's good offices.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, three distinct areas of control<sup>5</sup> have emerged that reflect the political divisions and

---

1 We would like to thank Steven Heydemann (Smith College) and Erwin van Veen (Clingendael) for their constructive review of this paper. Its contents naturally remain the responsibility of the authors.

2 See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-syria-russia-iran-hold-highest-level-talks-since-syrian-war-2023-05-10/> (accessed 10 May 2023).

3 See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/arab-league-set-readmit-syria-relations-with-assad-normalise-2023-05-07/> (accessed 10 May 2023).

4 During the initial years of the conflict, the UN played a central role in diplomatic efforts. Between 2012 and 2015, the key stakeholders were keen to develop a UN-endorsed track, which eventually materialised in UNSCR 2254 in December 2015. While not all conflict parties necessarily intended to engage in serious negotiations on its basis, the resolution nevertheless provided external actors with a framework to legitimise their policies. However, after the adoption of UNSCR 2254, the so-called Islamic State became the focus of attention while Russia gradually undermined the resolution's significance by convincing the UN to get behind the Astana track and, later, narrowing talks to the Constitutional Committee.

5 This classification is based on the external powers that guarantee the areas of control, i.e. Russia/Iran for regime areas, the US for areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), and Turkey for areas of northern Syria. However, areas guaranteed by Turkey are split into two major political and military entities, namely Idlib and adjacent territory controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), and areas of northern Aleppo, Raqqah and Hasakah that are controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Syrian Interim Government (SIG) with significant oversight from Turkish authorities.

balance of power between Syria's conflict parties and their external supporters. Today, Syria is a *de facto* divided country in an ongoing state of civil war, yet with largely frozen frontlines. At the same time, the heavy internationalisation of the Syrian conflict means that rivalries among third countries perpetuate a vicious conflict cycle. To break this cycle, effective mediation remains crucial.

The UN's steadily declining mediation role raises two major questions. First, what are the constraints that limit the Special Envoy's room for manoeuvre in Syria's complex conflict environment? Second, how has the Special Envoy attempted to move the political process forward in light of these constraints?<sup>6</sup> To answer these questions, the report explores the constraining factors and critically assesses the Office of the Special Envoy's (OSE) strategic approach as well as its tactical conduct. As evidence base, it uses the OSE's 44 briefings to the UN Security Council between February 2019 and April 2023, OSE media outputs, confidential interviews with former UN officers, and representatives of Western conflict stakeholders, the Syrian opposition and Syrian civil society.<sup>7</sup> The paper's recommendations offer food for thought on how the UN-led mediation effort can be refocused on effective conflict management that takes relations between competing areas of control as a starting point instead of focusing solely on relations between the Assad regime and external powers. Ultimately, the paper intends to help policy makers in upgrading the OSE's performance to mitigate the spillover effects of Syria's civil war in light of recent regional efforts, such as Syria's re-entry into the Arab League.

---

6 For an overview of the goals he set himself, see Section 3.

7 The production of this paper involved 15 extensive interviews. Six of them engaged representatives of the Syrian opposition and civil society while nine engaged serving and former civil servants and diplomats, almost all of whom are Western or are living in the West. While the authors agree that this might colour the findings of this paper, the relative openness of these individuals to speak on and off the record provides a great deal of useful context. Many serving or former diplomats from Russia, Iran, Turkey and Arab states refuse or are reluctant to engage with researchers in an open and frank way. Prior to publication, the paper has been shared with senior members of the OSE in order to enable constructive dialogue on its contents. However, this does not imply that the paper represents the views of those engaged. All views and arguments presented are those of the authors unless explicitly stated otherwise.



## 2 Constraining factors and sources of influence

The Special Envoy's room for manoeuvre is constrained by the conflict parties' willingness to compromise. The extent to which they are willing to do so depends largely on the balance of political and military power. In a highly internationalised conflict, this balance of power is greatly influenced by external conflict parties. During the initial years of the uprising, the Syrian parties to the conflict did not appear to be interested in reaching a compromise. Basically, they viewed the conflict as a zero-sum game. For Assad, any political concession to the opposition – however minor – was seen as a slippery slope that would have the same effect on his regime as perestroika had on the Soviet Union. The regime's centralised structure of power and its steadfast refusal to compromise or negotiate at the strategic level made its acceptance of the provisions of UNSCR 2254<sup>8</sup> – which included political reforms and power sharing – highly doubtful. In contrast to its unwillingness to contemplate anything other than cosmetic changes to its power structure, the regime displayed flexibility on military matters. It entered into local ceasefires and co-opted rebels when it suited, but with an overall strategic intent of emerging victorious on the battlefield, however long it would take. The unwavering support of Russia and Iran enabled this approach. For the US and its allies, an outright opposition military victory was not a desirable outcome because of the perceived likelihood of state collapse and an Islamist takeover. Instead, their approach was to apply military pressure on Assad by arming rebel groups and forcing him to the negotiating table. The opposition did not recognise the US strategy for what it turned out to be – a holding pattern while the Iran nuclear deal was being negotiated – and maintained its maximalist position on both the political and military dimensions to the conflict, without having the means to bring it closer. The opposition viewed UNSCR 2254 as a recipe for Assad's immediate departure by forming a transitional governing body that would rule Syria after his removal from power.

The Russian and Iranian military interventions on behalf of Damascus turned out to be far more dedicated and consistent than the support that Syrian opposition

---

8 See: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2254> (accessed 22 June 2023).

groups received from their external backers, most importantly the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan. In early 2019, when Geir Pedersen formally assumed the position of UN Special Envoy, Assad was already considered by some as the war's victor.<sup>9</sup> Hence, prospects for the success of Pedersen's mission to facilitate implementation of UNSCR 2254, the only internationally agreed-upon formula for resolving the Syrian conflict, were not promising. In 2018, the Syrian army and its backers had launched countrywide military offensives to defeat the opposition forces. One by one they had crushed three major opposition strongholds in Damascus, Homs and Daraa that were nominally covered by de-escalation agreements between Russia, Turkey, Iran and, partly, the US.<sup>10</sup> In late summer, regime forces turned towards Idlib, the last of four so-called 'de-escalation zones'. A major offensive was prevented when Turkey and Russia signed the Sochi agreement in September 2018, which set up a demilitarised buffer zone along Idlib's frontlines.<sup>11</sup>

Pedersen's predecessor, Staffan de Mistura, had resigned in light of Assad's pursuit of a battlefield victory, which was antithetical to a negotiated settlement, stating that he could not stand the idea of shaking Bashar al-Assad's hand and saying '*malesh*' (Arabic for *Let's forget about it!*).<sup>12</sup> Pedersen faced the same dilemma. When he briefed the UN Security Council for the first time in late February 2019, he noted he had been well received in Damascus where then Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem expressed '*interest in the success*' of his

---

9 See e.g.: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/30/syria-year-cemented-assad-victory-trump-us-troops> (accessed 20 May 2023) and <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/13/after-7-years-of-war-assad-has-won-in-syria-whats-next-for-washington/> (accessed 20 May 2023).

10 The Astana trio announced the decision to establish four de-escalation zones in May 2017. Over the following months, individual ceasefire deals were negotiated for each zone. Given US support for armed opposition groups in southern Syria at that time, and the proximity to US key allies Israel and Jordan, the US negotiated the final ceasefire agreement for the southern de-escalation zone directly with Russia. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ceasefire-idUSKBN19S2DG> (accessed 6 March 2023).

11 See: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/58574> (accessed 4 February 2023).

12 See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/05/ex-un-syria-envoy-says-he-quit-to-avoid-having-to-shake-assads-hand> (accessed 26 January 2023).

mission.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, regime forces had recently launched a new offensive in northwest Syria that displaced more than 55,000 civilians within four weeks.

All this time, UNSCR 2254 remained a central point of reference for the UN's Syria diplomacy. But it proved to be mere words on paper rather than a driver of mediation activity since external conflict parties were unwilling to put their full weight behind diplomacy beyond their vested interests. However, this does not mean that the Special Envoy's role was doomed to insignificance or to be solely reactive. Pedersen and his team at the OSE hold soft power in their ability to shape the international discourse on the Syrian conflict and provide ideas for conflict management and resolution that stakeholders would not bring up themselves for reasons of strategy, lack of knowledge, or lack of creativity. On the one hand, Pedersen is restricted by his mandate and dependent on the cooperation of powerful states, governments and multilateral institutions such as the EU, which limits his room for manoeuvre. On the other hand, these very same stakeholders also use the OSE's directions as a source of legitimacy and inspiration for their policies, which can increase Pedersen's room for manoeuvre. This dynamic relationship can work both positively and negatively.

---

13 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 28 February 2019, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-02-28\\_scb.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-02-28_scb.pdf) (accessed 8 April 2023).

### 3 Evolution of the OSE's Syria strategy 2019–2023

In his first briefing to the UN Security Council on 28 February 2019, Pedersen set out five goals for his work:<sup>14</sup>

- *To begin and deepen a sustained dialogue with the Syrian government and the opposition on building trust and confidence towards a safe, calm and neutral environment.*
- *To see more concrete action on detainees, abductees and missing persons through engagement with the Astana players and the Syrian parties and all concerned.*
- *To engage a wide range of Syrians and to involve them in the process.*
- *To convene a credible, balanced and inclusive Constitutional Committee as soon as possible.*
- *To help the international parties deepen their own dialogue towards the common purpose of a credible and sustainable settlement of the Syrian conflict that can enjoy international legitimacy.*

Pedersen has continuously repeated these goals, albeit with different emphasis depending on political dynamics at particular points in time. The remainder of the report analyses how the OSE approached these goals and explores why its operating logic and methods frequently clashed with the realities of the conflict, the capacity of the OSE itself and sometimes even ethical considerations.<sup>15</sup>

---

14 Ibid. (accessed 29 January 2023).

15 According to a UN definition, capacity refers to 'skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world'. Based on this definition, the behaviour and actions of the OSE such as considering a pilot project on refugee returns (see Section 3.2) and its decision to continue the Constitutional Committee despite the Syrian government officially declaring its non-participation (see Section 3.4) can be described as a shortfall of capacity, including ethical standards. See: <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building> (accessed 2 July 2023).

### 3.1 Creating a safe, calm and neutral environment

The notion of a safe, calm and neutral environment (SCNE) has its origins in the Geneva Communiqué.<sup>16</sup> In June 2012, the so-called Action Group for Syria met at the UN's Geneva offices and adopted the document that later became the basis for UNSCR 2254.<sup>17</sup> The Communiqué stipulated that an SCNE should be established by an interim governing body responsible for implementing a political transition. Shortly after the adoption of UNSCR 2254 in December 2015, it became clear that the Assad regime and its backers had no interest in implementing the resolution. UN-sponsored discussions in Geneva were fruitless and the transitional governing body never materialised. Instead, military escalation, including Turkish troop incursions and increased US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), gradually led to the *de facto* partitioning of the country into three distinct zones of influence that persists to this day.<sup>18</sup> This is why the notion of a SCNE had a wholly different context when Pedersen started his tenure in February 2019. Given the realities on the ground, creating an SCNE today means achieving the largest possible extent of de-escalation within and between the different areas of control in a factually divided country. This implies that, contrary to the provisions of the Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254, the creation of an SCNE must now precede the establishment of a transitional governing body and not the other way round. Put another way, the process of creating an SCNE requires structured negotiations and reciprocal concessions that cumulatively might build a path to a political transition. SCNE has become a pre-transitional phase between the current frozen state of the conflict and the political transition outlined in UNSCR 2254.

In this light, Pedersen has correctly used the term SCNE to describe a situation that predates a formal political settlement but in which 'positive conditions on

---

16 For the full text of the Communiqué see: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S2012%20522.pdf> (accessed 29 January 2023).

17 In 2012, the Action Group for Syria was initiated by then UN Special Envoy for Syria Kofi Annan. It involved key stakeholders, including representatives from the League of Arab States, the European Union, China, Russia, Turkey and the US.

18 See: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/01/27/syrias-dissolving-line-between-state-and-nonstate-actors/> (accessed 8 March 2023).

the ground' can emerge.<sup>19</sup> According to Pedersen, an SCNE would be the type of environment in which the Constitutional Committee could 'unfold', and that could pave the way for free and fair UN-supervised elections. Pedersen has also called for an SCNE to describe the conditions that would enable the 'safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees'.<sup>20</sup> In his Security Council Briefing (SCB) of 28 September 2021, he urged to remove at least 'some of the obstacles to returns' – whether in terms of the security situation, legislation, resources or livelihoods.<sup>21</sup> The Envoy's statements implied that refugee returns would not be tied to a broader political settlement in line with UNSCR 2254, but rather to a gradual improvement of conditions on the ground. With a broader settlement being out of reach, formulating more achievable goals for the medium term is reasonable and in line with resolution UNSCR 2254 as well as UNHCR guidelines on refugee returns.<sup>22</sup> But, as Pedersen himself noted, the vast majority of Syrians do not wish to return due to security concerns arising from the Assad regime's systematic use of violence against its own population.<sup>23</sup> In practice, these concerns cannot be addressed without an encompassing negotiated settlement that will allow UNHCR criteria to be met, including, for example, a comprehensive Security Sector Reform (SSR) effort, which is a non-starter for the regime. The shift of emphasis in the Envoy's narrative use of SCNE – from depicting it as an enabling precondition for political change to an environment conducive to refugee return – encouraged dialogue with the Assad regime on issues susceptible to bad faith exploitation. After all, the Assad regime at no time made a secret of its disinterest in taking back a considerable number of refugees, most of whom it considers to be traitors. Nonetheless, it makes use of the refugee issue to develop leverage and regain legitimacy vis-a-vis countries in the region and beyond that host Syrian refugees and where there is a political-social push for returns irrespective of international standards.

---

19 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 27 June 2019, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27\\_scb.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27_scb.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

20 Ibid.

21 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 28 September 2021, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

22 See: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63223> (accessed 22 April 2023).

23 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 29 June 2022, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2022-06-29\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2022-06-29_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

An OSE pilot project launched in the first half of 2022 illustrates the danger of a discourse that considers refugee returns detached from the pivotal question of a broader political transition or settlement. According to well-placed sources with knowledge of the matter, a senior official of the EU's External Action Service suggested to Pedersen that positive movement on the refugee return file could pave the way for gradual engagement with the regime.<sup>24</sup> Pedersen, who was looking for possible regime concessions for his step-for-step approach (addressed in detail in Sections 2.5 and 3), then set in motion a pilot project with the idea of facilitating the return of a limited number of Syrian refugees from Lebanon. When Pedersen began to advocate for the proposal, he was told by the United States to 'back off' because of the sensitivity of the issue and because it could encourage host countries to forcibly return refugees. According to the same sources, Pedersen only stepped back after the US and UNHCR warned him a second time not to politicise the refugee file. The initiative barely lasted three months and had no practical adverse effects on any refugees, but it illustrates the risk of putting refugee returns on the negotiation table 'as bargaining chips'. For example, it feeds populist arguments in host countries for expedited returns to a 'safe Syria'. In public statements, Pedersen has since adapted his wording, emphasising that "a wide range of actions on all these fronts", in other words security, livelihoods, basic services, housing, and military service, will be essential to creating an SCNE that allows refugee returns.<sup>25</sup>

With the aims of the Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254 out of reach for the time being, the OSE has so far not attempted to publicly conceptualise or operationalise the notion of an SCNE as a transitional state with a short-term focus on conflict management in a situation of *de facto* partition that might evolve into a steppingstone towards a power-sharing agreement in line with UNSCR 2254 in the longer term. Instead, the term continues to describe a rather vague favourable situation of a stable ceasefire in which constructive diplomacy has a chance of bearing some fruit, with other OSE goals (examined below) now viewed as the means to achieving such a more favourable situation. The OSE may argue that its step-for-step approach can be considered a way to operationalise

---

24 Interviews with two sources with direct knowledge of the matter conducted between December 2022 and May 2023. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, further information on the interviewees cannot be provided.

25 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 25 January 2023, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 29 January 2023).

the ‘SCNE’ notion since the term does not have the full buy-in of all stakeholders. As a matter of tactics, it could be advisable to delink step-for-step and SCNE at least optically. The problem with this is two-fold, however. First, without a comprehensive framework and roadmap that makes clear where the process is leading, stakeholder buy-in will continue to be half-hearted. Second, a vaguely defined approach, however well-intentioned, risks encouraging the emergence of a skewed marketplace of concessions that favours Assad and marginalises the 40 per cent of Syria outside of his control (see Sections 3.5 and 4 for an in-depth examination of the OSE’s step-for-step approach).

### 3.2 Achieving progress on the fate of detainees, abductees and missing persons

Given the unspeakable horrors the Assad regime’s systematic, industrial-scale detention and torture practices<sup>26</sup> have imposed on its victims and their relatives, including tearing apart the social fabric of entire communities, it is morally and strategically imperative for any UN envoy to push for more clarity on the fate of detainees, abductees and missing persons.<sup>27</sup> Pedersen has done so from the outset, identifying the issue as an area where ‘trust and confidence’ between the conflict parties could be built based on reciprocal steps.<sup>28</sup> The OSE’s involvement in actual negotiations over these issues was nevertheless rather limited. Pedersen’s predecessor had ‘outsourced’ the file to the Astana Working Group on Detainees, as a former UN officer put it.<sup>29</sup> The Working Group can be described as a framework for discreet negotiations among the Astana trio.<sup>30</sup> According to Pedersen, the Working Group facilitated seven prisoner exchanges resulting in a total of 139 individuals being released between November 2019 and June 2022.<sup>31</sup> This scale is marginal when compared with the estimated 132,000 individuals

---

26 See, for example: <https://www.admsp.org/reports/chain-of-command-behind-atrocities-at-syrias-most-notorious-prison-sednaya-revealed> (accessed 12 May 2023) and <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/08/syria-torture-prisons/> (accessed 12 May 2023).

27 Interview with former UN officer, 2 December 2022.

28 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 27 June 2019, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27\\_scb.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27_scb.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

29 Interview with former UN officer, 2 December 2022.

30 The Astana trio is a name for the three guarantors of the Astana process Russia, Turkey and Iran.

31 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/syria-still-risks-economic-collapse-says-un-envoy> (accessed 30 January 2023).



who remain detained or are missing.<sup>32</sup> In the past decade, additional releases happened mostly in the context of specific person-for-person exchanges or as a result of bargaining by local armed groups to secure free passage or similar deals during the height of the violence (2012–2018). This modus was naturally limited due to the discrepancy between the numbers of detainees held by the different conflict parties, which makes it impossible to achieve reciprocity based on a like-for-like logic.

So-called amnesties by the Assad regime did not result in the release of considerable numbers of detainees either.<sup>33</sup> There is no reason to believe that even massive concessions would convince the Assad regime to release larger numbers as the systematic detention of civilians and anyone who is considered a potential threat is a key element of how the regime exercises power. In this system, the extreme violence in detention facilities is kept ambiguous in order to discipline the population.<sup>34</sup> In addition, selling information about the fate of detainees has become a lucrative business for the military and security apparatus.<sup>35</sup> In this light, Pedersen's assessment that progress on the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons would be welcomed by the regime is questionable.<sup>36</sup>

The evolution of Decree no. 7, the largest of 19 amnesties so far, suggests that the Envoy exaggerated gestures by the regime to create an impression of progress. In April 2022, the regime released 476 prisoners accused of 'terrorism', including some who had been detained since 2011. The regime used the occasion for PR purposes, forcing some of those released to thank Assad for his beneficence and to profess loyalty to him.<sup>37</sup> Others were reportedly rearrested shortly after their

---

32 See: <https://snhr.org/blog/2022/05/16/the-syrian-regime-has-released-476-people-under-amnesty-decree-7-2022-and-is-still-detaining-some-132000-of-those-arrested-since-march-2011/> (accessed 29 January 2023).

33 Ibid.

34 S. Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 159-188.

35 See: <https://syriauntold.com/2021/04/13/syrias-lucrative-detainment-market-how-damascus-exploits-detainees-families-for-money/> (accessed 8 March 2023).

36 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 26 April 2022, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2022-04-26\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2022-04-26_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

37 See: <https://tcf.org/content/report/syrian-prisoner-amnesty-could-be-a-breakthrough-if-damascus-is-ready-to-do-more/> (accessed 29 January 2023).

release.<sup>38</sup> On the international stage, the Assad regime presented the amnesty as ‘exceptional in legal, social and political terms’.<sup>39</sup> Russia supported this framing in front of the UN Security Council, claiming that the amnesty would help to create favourable conditions for refugee returns.<sup>40</sup> Pedersen echoed the broad sentiment when he declared that the amnesty offered an opportunity to build confidence that ‘should not be missed’ and expressed his hope for further action on the issue.<sup>41</sup> But according to a European diplomat, it was Pedersen who tried to convince the Assad regime to declare the amnesty as a confidence-building measure in the first place. ‘Sadly’, the diplomat said, ‘this is how the UN is today. It takes every crumb the regime throws in its direction, seeks to frame the amnesty as a step so that it can claim that there is movement and then convince others to make concessions to the regime.’<sup>42</sup>

However, the Assad regime did not consult or involve the OSE, and did not even share information about the releases with it. Instead, it informed the foreign ministry of another Arab state, which then happened to pass the information to Pedersen who also received it from other sources.<sup>43</sup> Damascus’ unilateral conduct, combined with the absence of further implementation of the decree and the history of the regime’s detention policy, leaves little doubt that the matter of detainees, abductees and missing persons never had the makings of a ‘practical and constructive entry point for trust-building actions’<sup>44</sup> that Pedersen desired. Working on the release of detainees is clearly part of the OSE’s mandate, but it appears that Pedersen tried to frame the regime’s behaviour as constructive, even though there was no plausible reason to believe progress could be made in a ‘meaningful way and at a meaningful scale’.<sup>45</sup> Western diplomats, Syrian opposition negotiators and civil society representatives interviewed for this publication share the impression that the Envoy used a file of emotional and

---

38 Ibid.

39 See: <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.9083> (accessed 29 January 2023).

40 Ibid.

41 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 29 June 2022, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2022-06-29\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2022-06-29_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

42 Interview with European diplomat, 2 December 2022.

43 Interview with European diplomat, 13 December 2022.

44 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 27 June 2019, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27\\_scb.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27_scb.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

45 Ibid.

political significance to create the impression that the Assad regime would be open to engage in constructive negotiations, even if there was no factual basis to support this idea.

Such conduct risks contributing to a climate of slow-motion normalisation with the Assad regime, which is problematic because unilaterally strengthening the regime, however incrementally or modestly, amounts to weakening Syrian areas and their populations that are not under Assad's rule. The following quote from Dan Stoenescu, Chargé d'Affaires of the European Union to Syria, offers a good example of how this might work: *'We want Syria to open up to a political process that observes democracy, human rights, a political process that should respect the Syrian people. The authorities in Damascus have made a number of steps in that direction. For instance, they passed Decree no. 7 of April 2022, which provides a general amnesty to political prisoners.'*<sup>46</sup>

In August 2022, the UN Secretary-General published a report requested by the General Assembly on how to bolster efforts to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons (including those detained).<sup>47</sup> The report calls for the creation of a new international body mandated to *'clarify the fate and whereabouts of persons (...) and to provide adequate support to victims, survivors and the families of those missing'*.<sup>48</sup> Pedersen welcomed the initiative as a *'pathway able to offer tangible progress'*.<sup>49</sup> As noted in the report, the new body can serve as a point of entry for survivors and families, and provide a framework for existing actors to coordinate their work. When Pedersen's predecessor supported the creation of the Astana Working Group in December 2017, he was criticised for *'abandoning'* a crucial file.<sup>50</sup> However, this new international body – whose establishment under UN auspices was authorised by the General Assembly on 29 June 2023 – provides the OSE with the possibility to increase its footprint on

---

46 See: <https://www.veridica.ro/en/interviews/dan-stoenescu-charge-daffaires-of-the-european-union-to-syria-the-situation-in-ukraine-is-also-affecting-syria> (accessed 6 February 2023).

47 See: <https://www.un.org/pga/76/wp-content/uploads/sites/101/2022/02/Situation-of-human-rights-in-the-Syrian-Arab-Republic-A-RES-76-228.pdf> (accessed 29 January 2023).

48 Missing people in the Syrian Arab Republic, Report of the Secretary-General, online: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/reports/a76890-missing-people-syrian-arab-republic-report-secretary-general> (accessed 29 January 2023).

49 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 25 January 2023, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

50 Interview with former UN officer, 2 December 2022.

this important issue, even though the room for manoeuvre will remain limited due to the intransigence of the Assad regime,<sup>51</sup> which in itself is in part a function of the regime's use of terror as a weapon to intimidate and control its population.

### 3.3 Involving a wide range of Syrians

Inclusivity in conflict negotiations and conflict resolution has been a contentious issue since the early days of the conflict when Syrians began forming umbrella organisations that claimed to be representative and therefore entitled to participate in negotiations. Many of those who did not manage to win recognition by international actors or preferred to remain in the more neutral space of civil society, continued to call for a greater civic role and found open ears in Western governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Due to its rapidly emerging vibrant and media-effective pro-democracy and human rights activism, Syrian civil society came to be seen by the West as a corrective weight to the conservatives and Islamists that dominated the recognised political opposition.<sup>52</sup> In 2014, the UN agreed to form a small group of civil society figures that acted as a sounding board for then envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi. His successor, Staffan de Mistura, in 2016 formalised and expanded this group into the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR).<sup>53</sup> In addition, a group of initially 12 Syrian women was formalised into the Women's Advisory Board (WAB). The overall purpose of the WAB and CSSR is threefold. First, the formats allow the OSE to pick the

---

51 The Assad regime, along with Russia and China, has objected to the mechanism. Syria's UN ambassador Bassam Sabbagh immediately rejected it as a 'bizarre mysterious mechanism with no precise definition of the concept of missing persons, a mechanism that is not time limited or geographically bound'. See: <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230629-un-general-assembly-establishes-body-to-probe-fate-of-syria-s-missing> (accessed: 2 July 2023).

52 The definition of what constitutes 'civil society' in the Syrian context is a matter of debate. One reading is that 'civil society's primary role should be advocating for and upholding the highest adherence to human rights.' This narrow definition of civil society is convenient from a Western point of view but excludes many grassroots and often more conservative civil networks (like mosque-run associations, sports clubs, farming cooperatives, etc.) that sometimes pre-date the conflict and do not fit neatly into the human rights-centric definition. As a result, they get excluded from civil society support programmes. See: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/05/15/how-syrian-civil-society-lost-its-independence-in-war-of-conflicting-agendas-pub-81802> (accessed 19 May 2023).

53 M. Theros, R. Turkmani, 'Engendering civiness in the Syrian peacemaking process', in: *Journal of Civil Society*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2022, pp. 183-200.

brains of a wide range of well-connected and informed Syrians. Second, the OSE facilitates direct advocacy of Syrian civil society to international conflict stakeholders. Third, the format stimulates dialogue, networking and partnership building among Syrian civil society.

The WAB is coordinated jointly by the OSE and UN Women, who facilitate quarterly meetings with international actors to discuss a wide range of issues. For example, the WAB has recently prepared research and suggestions on the questions of how decentralisation and economic integration can be made compatible, and what decentralisation means for subnational identities.<sup>54</sup> These outputs have not been publicised or made widely available.

Anyone who is not part of a political party can apply to join the WAB. The OSE interviews candidates and consults the WAB before taking a final decision. Additions are rare though. Since 2016, four members resigned, one died, and only seven new members were added. From the beginning, the WAB faced criticism from a number of Syrian women and civil society organisations who pointed to a lack of transparency in the selection process and insufficient vetting. Further criticism concerned its decision to accept an advisory role instead of insisting on a direct role in negotiations. In a piece for the Heinrich Böll Foundation, feminist researcher Rula Asad argues that Syria's feminist movement does not support the WAB, which she describes as a *'peripheral board whose tasks are confined to providing counsel to the UN Special Envoy Office and controlling and silencing those women's voices by this sideline channel'*.<sup>55</sup> A member of the WAB and a female member of the CSSR noted that the board was never supposed to be representative of the feminist movement exclusively, but that it nevertheless includes at least six committed feminist leaders.<sup>56</sup> It appears that the WAB, like any such body that is seen as somehow representative by third parties, is an arena for disputes over representation and what defines feminism in the first place. Similar dynamics can be observed in the CSSR regarding the question of what constitutes civil society.

The CSSR is coordinated by the OSE, with two NGOs – SwissPeace and the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) – acting as implementing

---

54 Interview with WAB member, 3 March 2023.

55 See: <https://www.boell.de/en/2022/01/25/der-syrische-frauenrat-aus-fehlern-lernen> (accessed 3 March 2023).

56 Interview with WAB member, 4 March 2023; Interview with CSSR participant, 5 March 2023.

partners. Who exactly participates, and to what extent, is unclear, which means that the degree of inclusivity that the CSSR provides remains opaque to Syrians and third parties alike. The UN argues that it cannot provide lists of attendees for safety reasons. Any individual or organisation that is not affiliated with a political organisation or armed group can apply for participation in the CSSR. Following some background research, the UN then appoints participants to thematic working groups of about 25–30 individuals. Meetings take place in Geneva, in the region and, since the Covid-19 pandemic particularly, online. Recently, these working groups have focused on issues such as local decentralisation and protection. After seven to nine months, the working groups meet with the OSE in Geneva for three days where they present and discuss findings.

The focus on thematic working groups has been introduced during Pedersen's term. According to a longstanding participant of the CSSR, this procedure dilutes the CSSR's original objective, namely supporting negotiations. The interviewee described the period under the previous Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, as the CSSR's 'golden times'. De Mistura would gather CSSR members during formal negotiations, inform them about progress, and pick their brains on what to do. The OSE under Pedersen, in contrast, has not engaged civil society actors in the same manner, even though CSSR members proposed models for local mediation that would resonate with the rationale of step-for-step diplomacy.<sup>57</sup> However, the deadlock of the political process means that there are no negotiations that the CSSR could support. In this regard, the shift to thematic working groups can also be seen as a genuine effort to build capacity and facilitate the development of joint visions among Syrian civil society with a long-term focus. A more generous view of the deadlocked state of negotiations is that the establishment of a civil society component<sup>58</sup> and above average representation of women<sup>59</sup> in the Constitutional Committee constitute a success in themselves, despite the lack of substantive progress.<sup>60</sup> The cogency of this argument depends on whether one

---

57 Interview with CSSR participant, 5 March 2023.

58 The third of the Constitutional Committee that consists of civil society representatives is composed of 29 individuals chosen by the Assad regime and 21 individuals chosen by the UN. From these 50 names, eight were chosen by the Assad regime and seven by the Syrian Negotiation Committee (SNC) to form the so-called small group that is supposed to prepare and draft a constitutional reform together with 15 delegates of the regime and opposition delegations respectively.

59 28 per cent of the Constitutional Committee's members are female.

60 Interview with European diplomat, 27 February 2023.

assesses the Constitutional Committee as a worthwhile effort or as a charade that has nothing to do with negotiations.

According to the UN, more than 1,000 Syrians have participated in the CSSR since 2016. The UN has kept the definition of ‘civil society’ flexible for good reasons. After all, Syria’s authoritarian rulers have for decades restricted the emergence of independent civil society. Since the UN is required to decide who is a reputable civil society representative and who is not, it functions as gatekeeper. Willingly or not, the UN has shaped perceptions about which civil society organisations (CSOs) are relevant and respectable and which are not, particularly vis-a-vis Western conflict stakeholders who are crucial in terms of funding those CSOs. CSOs that can network, lobby and secure funding most effectively are those with Western educated leaders in the field of human rights and democracy advocacy.<sup>61</sup> This is part of the reason why some participants and external critics describe the most active core group within the CSSR as a ‘private club’ that is ultimately interested in self-preservation and discursive power.<sup>62</sup> However, the OSE’s means to shape group dynamics and address long-standing conflicts among Syrian civil actors are limited.

Both the CSSR and WAB are experimental initiatives of a considerable size that allowed the OSE to involve a broad range of Syrians in its mediation efforts, directly and indirectly. Six years into their existence, they constitute promising efforts to increase the inclusivity and visibility of civil society in a peace process and should be commended as a continuation of a UN approach established by previous envoys. However, their influence is limited. Key agreements on Syria<sup>63</sup> were thrashed out outside of the UN’s framework between male conflict actors, without civil society participation and almost exclusively against a backdrop of applying or threatening force. Nevertheless, the formalised roles that the WAB and CSSR have are an innovation in UN mediation that can help to inform future mediation attempts. It is likely that the experiment can be improved by enhancing its transparency, however. For instance, the CSSR and WAB have consistently raised and debated the issue of holding perpetrators of human rights violations

---

61 Interview with former CSSR participant, 26 February 2023.

62 Ibid.

63 This refers to agreements on ceasefires, such as the Turkish-Russian ceasefire of March 2020, and diplomatic initiatives, such as the Amman group’s May 2023 plan to set up a working group with the Assad regime to address the issue of narco-trafficking.

and war crimes accountable during their own meetings,<sup>64</sup> whereas the OSE has highlighted accountability only once in four years in its monthly public reflections on its exchanges with the CSSR and WAB. Instead, the OSE's public briefings have frequently addressed concerns such as human rights and the need for a political process in line with UNSCR 2254. This leaves a gap between internal discussion (OSE with CSSR and WAB) and external discussion (OSE with the UNSC) that creates confusion. Clearer discussions about the possibilities and limits of their respective roles between the OSE, CSSR and WAB would help to make sure that civil society talking points are reflected more accurately.

### 3.4 Convening the Constitutional Committee

The Constitutional Committee is a cross-party committee mandated to produce a draft for constitutional reform that is supposed to advance the overall political process. Pedersen inherited oversight of this political track from his predecessor, who had worked on establishing the Committee since early 2018. The initiative to establish the Committee came from Russia and was introduced in the framework of Russia-sponsored meetings in Sochi in January 2018.<sup>65</sup> Then Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, decided to support the initiative in order to secure a strong UN role and to convene the Committee in Geneva instead of Sochi or Damascus, which Russia had initially proposed. After six months of intense haggling, agreement was reached on the composition of the 50 regime and opposition representatives on the Committee. The sticking point was the civil society list of representatives that the UN had fought for to be part of the process and the composition of which remained hotly contested. During Pedersen's first nine months in office, he solved the issue of civil society representation and achieved consensus on the Committee's procedures. Pedersen emphasised the Committee's potential as a door opener for deeper dialogue and revitalisation of the political process. However, after an initially promising first meeting in October 2019, discussions quickly collapsed, largely due to the regime delegation's intransigence and delaying tactics. The regime delegation left the second meeting before it began. But even before its sudden departure, Assad had declared that 'there is no Geneva' and that the regime delegation was in fact only a group of people 'supported by the Syrian government', and that the Syrian

---

64 Interviews with two CSSR members, 19 May 2023.

65 See: Hauch, L., *Syria's Constitutional Committee in Review*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.



government would not be part of the process, meaning it would not be bound by any decisions made by the Committee.<sup>66</sup> In order to keep the process alive, the OSE did not address the Assad regime's explicit withdrawal from the Committee.

The next six sessions were characterised by discussions about agendas and procedures as well as some exchanges on statements of general positioning, but without a single constitutional clause being agreed upon. In the more than three years of the Committee's existence, the delegations have not even started to work on a draft for a new constitution. Even if they had, any draft needs to be '*popularly approved and transposed into the national legal order – by a means that will need to be agreed*', as Pedersen noted in his SCB of 30 September 2019.<sup>67</sup> The absence of agreement on such a method makes the Committee a theoretical undertaking that can be stalled for an indefinite period. Since June 2022, the Committee has stopped convening because Russia has boycotted Geneva as a venue since Switzerland sanctioned Russia over the Ukraine war.<sup>68</sup> The Assad regime has followed Russia's lead and anyhow remains uncommitted to progress. In February 2021, after the fifth session, Pedersen pointed out that the Committee could not '*continue the way it has worked so far*'. To be a forum that builds trust and not the opposite, it would need a '*work plan and genuine interaction on concrete proposals*'.<sup>69</sup> Two years later, in January 2023, he noted in front of the Security Council that Ahmad Kuzbari, the regime-nominated Co-Chair, is '*yet to respond to my letter of last June on improving the Committee's working methods*'.<sup>70</sup>

According to a former UN officer, neither de Mistura nor Pedersen had any illusions about the prospects for genuine constitutional reform.<sup>71</sup> The Committee was rather seen as a way to bring about fresh impulses and to build some trust and confidence between the conflict parties. While this approach was certainly

---

66 See: <https://sana.sy/en/?p=177331> (accessed 2 February 2023).

67 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 30 September 2019, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-09-30\\_scb.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-09-30_scb.pdf) (accessed 2 February 2023).

68 See: <https://syriadirect.org/syrian-constitutional-committee-at-an-impasse-following-cancellation-of-its-ninth-session/> (accessed 2 February 2023).

69 See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1SMK22gNPU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1SMK22gNPU) (accessed 2 February 2023).

70 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 25 January 2023, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 2 February 2023).

71 Interview with former UN officer, 2 December 2022.

worth the attempt, an honest stocktaking of what has been achieved and what achievements might be realised would have raised serious questions about the Committee's *raison d'être*. A critical assessment can take the view that the Committee damaged the OSE's credibility as a serious mediator and provided the Assad regime and its Russian plus Iranian backers with some coverage and time to create facts on the ground. Meanwhile, they could pretend to engage in mediation efforts until international conflict fatigue set in and normalisation of the regime gained traction. Pedersen always emphasised that the Committee alone cannot solve the conflict and underlined the many secondary challenges that Syria faces.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, he allowed the process to continue for three years despite the fact that the Assad regime withdrew early on and despite the statement by the so-called government delegation during the second session in November 2019 that it would not be bound by the Terms of Procedure given that it did not represent the Syrian government.<sup>73</sup> From this point onwards, especially, the process created the illusion of progress – but in reality contributed to a climate in which external powers were spared from any need to focus their attention and become more creative. Instead, they could comfortably re-emphasise their support for the UN-sponsored Constitutional Committee. A more charitable assessment is that it is imperative for a UN Envoy to do whatever it takes to keep established communication platforms alive so that there is no need to start from scratch should political circumstances become more conducive to identifying and agreeing diplomatic solutions.<sup>74</sup> After all, diplomatic channels are hard to build but are easily destroyed.

Officially, Pedersen continues to state that he is keen to reconvene the Committee as soon as possible.<sup>75</sup> Overall, the Committee's *raison d'être* is questioned by a number of conflict stakeholders, but unilaterally withdrawing support is not a favoured option as it would give Russia and Assad ammunition to argue that the Syrian opposition and its Western supporters destroyed the political process. The Syrian opposition is in a particularly difficult situation.

---

72 The Constitutional Committee's Terms of Reference and Core Rules of Procedure also stress the *'importance of a broader political process moving forward'*. See: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S\\_2019\\_775\\_E.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S_2019_775_E.pdf) (accessed 4 February 2023).

73 Interview with Western diplomat, 6 May 2023.

74 Interview with former UN officer, 3 February 2023.

75 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 25 January 2023, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2023-01-25_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

*'It is not in our interest to end the only track in the political process that has somehow remained active, even if it is deadlocked,' a senior leader of the Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) said, adding that 'Assad is striving to end any political process in Geneva in order to bypass Resolution 2254 and convince the countries of the region and the international community to deal only with this regime and no other Syrian party, namely the opposition.'*<sup>76</sup>

### 3.5 Step-for-step diplomacy

Back in 2019, the Envoy saw the risk of a strategic stalemate in which conditions for Syrians would continue to deteriorate. He warned that a 'no-war-no-peace' scenario, in which front lines are mostly frozen but periodic conflict and unrest continue, must be avoided.<sup>77</sup> This is why he pointed to the need for 'tangible and reciprocal steps' on the ground that would build trust and confidence between the conflict parties to advance a broader political process. The Envoy subsequently called for concrete actions, which he labelled a 'step-for-step model' for the first time in his SCB of 22 November 2019. From then on, he regularly mentioned consultations with Syrian and international parties on this matter. The idea of step-for-step diplomacy describes the essence of any mediation: A mediator discreetly fathoms what conflict stakeholders are willing to put on the table, and what they want in return. With regard to areas that step-for-step diplomacy could address, Pedersen identified 'a nationwide ceasefire, countering UNSC-listed terrorist groups, sanctions, and alleviating economic hardship in general'.<sup>78</sup>

With a strategic stalemate unfolding after the Russian-Turkish March 2020 ceasefire, Pedersen's concerns about a 'no-war-no-peace' scenario became reality. As a reaction, the Envoy underlined that 'constructive diplomacy among key international players' was needed to move forward all aspects of his

---

76 Interview with senior SNC leader, 30 March 2023.

77 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 27 June 2019, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27\\_scb.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2019-06-27_scb.pdf) (accessed 30 March 2023).

78 See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1SMK22gNPU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1SMK22gNPU) (accessed 4 February 2023).

mandate.<sup>79</sup> Two months later, he expressed hope that the strategic stalemate would lead to a realisation that a military solution to the conflict was impossible, which might favour progress on step-for-step.<sup>80</sup> He reiterated this hope a year later, noting that *'simply trying to muddle through with the unacceptable status quo – especially given the humanitarian suffering, the continuing displacement crisis, the collapse of the economy, the de facto division of the country, to dangers of renewed escalation, and the continued threat of terrorism'* would come with grave risks and could inflict considerable costs on the conflict parties.<sup>81</sup> Again, Pedersen's hope that the stalemate would bring the conflict parties to the negotiation table did not materialise. Pedersen acknowledged that divisions remained deep and that a 'you first syndrome' would hinder progress. He also noted that key players would be *'more invested in conflict management than conflict resolution'*, risking Syria becoming a protracted conflict lasting for generations.<sup>82</sup> Pedersen did not elaborate on what exactly he meant by the terms 'conflict management' and 'conflict resolution'. But it is notable that he used them as if they were in contradiction with one another. In the spring of 2021, however, the Syrian war had reached a state in which effective conflict management had become a *prerequisite* for any attempts at conflict resolution.

Despite persistence of the 'you first syndrome', Pedersen noted in his Security Council briefing of 20 December 2021 that there was *'enough interest from all sides to test what could be possible via a wider political process'*. As an example, he cited US-Russian negotiations that had facilitated the adoption of UNSCR 2585<sup>83</sup> in July 2021, noting that these channels would be something to maintain and build on. While it is to be expected that a UN Envoy welcomes any agreement

---

79 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 19 August 2020, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-19\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2020-08-19_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

80 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 18 September 2020, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2020-09-18\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2020-09-18_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

81 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 20 December 2021, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021-12-20\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered\\_.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021-12-20_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered_.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

82 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 26 May 2021, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021-05-26\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered\\_.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021-05-26_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered_.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

83 See: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2585> (accessed 22 June 2023).

reached at the Security Council, Russia's humanitarian blackmailing<sup>84</sup> was by no means a positive example of trust and confidence building towards a 'virtuous cycle of reciprocal steps' that could advance a wider political process.<sup>85</sup> On the contrary, it increased distrust and unnecessarily politicised humanitarian aid, particularly matters of early recovery.<sup>86</sup> Once again, it appears that the Envoy tried to create the impression that there were at least some promising developments to build upon, even though reality said otherwise.

In February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine dramatically diminished potential room for constructive diplomacy between the US and Russia. Pedersen nevertheless continues to advocate for his step-for-step approach, even though he says a 'concerted, sustained, and robust diplomatic dialogue (...) particularly between the US and Russia' is a 'prerequisite' to his approach.<sup>87</sup>

---

84 Russia conditioned its approval for the renewal of the cross-border mandate, which allows the UN to bring aid from Turkey to northwest Syria without the permission of Damascus, on an increase in cross-line deliveries and early recovery assistance. See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2022/06/27/Is-Russia-about-to-block-a-key-aid-route-into-northwest-Syria> (accessed 12 May 2023).

85 United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Briefing to the Security Council, 20 December 2021, online: [https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021-12-20\\_secco\\_un\\_special\\_envoy\\_for\\_syria\\_mr\\_geir\\_o\\_pedersen\\_briefing\\_as\\_delivered\\_.pdf](https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2021-12-20_secco_un_special_envoy_for_syria_mr_geir_o_pedersen_briefing_as_delivered_.pdf) (accessed 30 January 2023).

86 Al-Abdeh, M., Hauch, L., *Early Recovery Assistance in Syria: Balancing Political and Humanitarian Needs*, Beirut: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023.

87 See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1SMK22gNPU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1SMK22gNPU) (accessed 4 February 2023).

## 4 Spotlight on current dynamics

With the Constitutional Committee being – depending on one’s optimism – either on hold or terminally dysfunctional, step-for-step diplomacy now constitutes the main thrust of the OSE’s efforts. Diplomats and other political figures concerned with the Syrian conflict interviewed for this publication argued unanimously that they are not sure what step-for-step is actually about. The reason for this confusion is probably that it is simply a mechanism without a roadmap for a negotiation framework that conflict stakeholders can consider and respond to. In the absence of such a framework, conflict stakeholders have interpreted Pedersen’s step-for-step initiative differently based on their individual experiences and perceptions of the conflict.

The opposition Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) initially rejected step-for-step because it saw it as a blank cheque to legitimise deeper engagement with the Assad regime without any clarity on details. Furthermore, it felt sidelined by the approach given that step-for-step appeared to focus on international conflict stakeholders and their relationship with the Assad regime without making the Syrian opposition part of the equation. In late 2022, SNC representatives told Pedersen privately that they would be open to a reassessment of their position if the Envoy shared an outline paper with them that the OSE had shared with international stakeholders such as the P3+1 (US, UK, France and Germany).<sup>88</sup> He has yet to do so.<sup>89</sup> While secrecy is part of diplomacy, putting the SNC, which is mandated to negotiate on behalf of the Syrian opposition in Geneva, on the backfoot is incompatible with UNSCR 2254’s provision of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned process. On the contrary, the OSE is effectively reducing the legitimacy of the opposition as a negotiating partner of equal standing, while

---

88 According to several sources, the OSE produced an outline paper comprising a list of 13 steps that could constitute concessions from the regime, such as easing the issuance of passports, minimising military conscription, and expanding humanitarian access. It is not clear whether Assad has agreed to negotiate any of these steps. However, from the regime’s perspective, developing and deepening bilateral relations with countries that are open to gradual normalisation is more convenient than having the UN as a go-between.

89 Interview with SNC president Dr Badr Jamous, 9 March 2023.

strengthening the legitimacy of the regime by implicitly treating it as the only viable Syrian interlocutor.

Russia for its part has been suspicious of step-for-step from the beginning. It saw it as an attempt by the OSE to build a parallel track to that of the Constitutional Committee in which the West would be dominant and Russia would have less influence. During a UN Security Council meeting on 26 April 2022, Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia politely but decisively dismissed step-for-step, requesting that Pedersen adhere to his mandate because *'we have a growing number of questions about the Special Envoy's attempts to advance his step-for-step initiative, whose specific content, participants and added value are still unclear. After all, both Damascus and the opposition reject his ideas.'*<sup>90</sup> This position may change if the Russians can manage to utilise step-for-step to gain discursive power and legitimise the quadripartite process they are attempting to establish with Turkey, Iran and the Assad regime (see below).

The US has also been reserved with regards to the OSE's step-for-step approach. According to an opposition source, Pedersen visited Washington DC twice between July and October 2022 to advocate for step-for-step.<sup>91</sup> However, according to the same source, Pedersen was asked by the US Envoy to Syria, Ethan Goldrich, not to mention step-for-step in the press release after one of their meetings. Instead, the US pressed for realism but offered conditional support if the Envoy first delivered results. In January 2023, the US, UK, France and Germany (P3+1) for the first time voiced support for step-for-step in a joint statement.<sup>92</sup> According to a senior negotiator involved in the Geneva track, the statement was a concession to Pedersen who had asked for concrete step-for-step proposals that he could present to Damascus during his visit in February.<sup>93</sup> The P3+1 agreed to voice general support, but refused to come up with offers as long as the regime did not make the first credible move.

Overall, European support for step-for-step is limited, mostly because of what Pedersen has called a *'you first syndrome'*. That is, most Europeans are not willing to put anything on the table before they know what they would get in

---

90 See: <https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.9022> (accessed 4 February 2023).

91 Interview with senior SNC figure, 12 December 2023.

92 See: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/-/2575032> (accessed 5 February 2023).

93 Interview with senior SNC leader, 14 February 2023.

return, or at least get a concrete framework for a negotiation process with clear milestones. This is where step-for-step diplomacy connects to the politics around early recovery (ER) assistance. ER is about humanitarian activities that go beyond the provision of immediate relief but that do not amount to full reconstruction. Western donors have agreed on the need to increase funding for ER to meet Syria's ever growing humanitarian needs.<sup>94</sup> Yet the lines between ER and reconstruction are blurry, which is why Russia has pushed to include the call for increased ER assistance in recent Security Council resolutions in return for approving the extension of the vital cross border mandate. Russia sees ER as a means to transform the discourse away from 'conflict' (a political term) to more technical recovery issues that suggest that Syria has reached a post-conflict phase.<sup>95</sup> Some Western states and institutions that see benefits in re-establishing at least some coordination with the Assad regime are also testing the waters.<sup>96</sup> Basically, ER allows outreach under the humanitarian aegis without risking significant political blowback. Germany's Syria Envoy, for example, has suggested a project to Pedersen whereby Germany would greenlight and fund Siemens to recondition a power station in Syria in return for yet to be defined concessions from the regime side, according to a diplomat with knowledge of the offer.<sup>97</sup> During his last visit to Berlin, Pedersen met a high-ranking state secretary of the Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development for the first time.<sup>98</sup> But putting concessions on the table that have both a strong humanitarian and political dimension risks creating a slippery slope that could gradually undermine the West's non-normalisation policy position. That being said, humanitarian activities, including ER, can constitute 'entry point(s) to then produce ceasefires, produce a political dialogue. And then get into an area where perhaps politics can also be discussed', as former UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura put

---

94 See: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2022/05/10/> (accessed 4 February 2023).

95 Al-Abdeh, M., Hauch, L., *Early Recovery Assistance in Syria: Balancing Political and Humanitarian Needs*, Beirut: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023.

96 For example, UN-Habitat urged policy makers in a recent report on the recovery of services and infrastructure in Syria to 'transcend typical divisions across humanitarian, early-recovery and long-term reconstruction and development goals'. This indirect call for reconstruction would require formal cooperation with the Assad regime and a dismantling of humanitarian and UN principles. See: N Habitat, *Recovery of Services and Infrastructure in Syria*, 2022, p. 10, online: <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/09/infrastructure.pdf> (accessed: 5 February 2023).

97 Call with European diplomat, 5 January 2023.

98 Interview with European policy adviser, 15 December 2022.



it.<sup>99</sup> But for that to happen, policy makers need to acknowledge the political dimension inherent in humanitarian engagement and to think of it as an element of diplomacy in an honest and transparent manner.

Ultimately, step-for-step reflects the ambiguity of the stalemate that has characterised the Syrian conflict since early 2020. The approach is too vague to be rejected out of hand, yet specific enough to allow conflict stakeholders to pretend to support progress on the diplomatic front. It simultaneously appeases those in Western capitals who wish for more engagement with Assad without breaching agreed policy positions that premise concessions on an irreversible political transition, as well as those who wish to see no such engagement.<sup>100</sup> However, the external powers that have boots on the ground and are more actively engaged in on-the-ground dynamics are not lining up behind the OSE's step-for-step approach. Russia and Turkey, especially, appear to prefer moving things along politically through bilateral tracks. Over the summer of 2022, Russia convinced Assad to deepen, the until then informal, contacts with Turkey's intelligence service. The outreach led to a meeting between the three countries' defence ministers in Moscow on 28 December followed by a meeting of the deputy foreign ministers on 4 April 2023 that included an Iranian delegation. So far, the process has culminated in talks between the foreign ministers of the four states in Moscow on 10 May 2023. While the outcome of this quadripartite process remains unclear, it has become apparent that it builds on the logic and mechanisms of the Astana track. Yet full reconciliation or a Turkish withdrawal from Syria can almost certainly be ruled out. After all, the Assad regime and its Russian patron do not have the means or the will to meet Turkish security interests sufficiently.<sup>101</sup> But the mere act of meeting and talking might already do the trick for the three sides concerned: Erdogan scored domestic points ahead of the May election; Russia maintains a strong position in Syria and further exacerbates tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies; while the Assad regime maintains gradual momentum for normalisation. The process could also pave the way for a number of pragmatic arrangements concerning trade routes and limited territorial swaps. From the perspective of the Astana group, step-for-step

---

99 See: <https://www.un.org/en/awake-at-night/S6-E2-staffan-de-mistura-harnessing-constructive-outrage> (accessed 4 February 2023).

100 See: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/syria-ten-years-we-still-need-political-solution-addresses-root-causes-conflict\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/syria-ten-years-we-still-need-political-solution-addresses-root-causes-conflict_en) (accessed 30 March 2023).

101 See: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/in-syria-cutting-and-running-is-not-on-the-cards-for-turkey/> (accessed 5 February 2023).

is largely a UN-mediated US/EU track with the regime that focuses on issues of sanctions and humanitarian aid, meaning that there is no obvious role for Russia, Turkey and Iran, or even Arab parties. The lack of a clear end goal for step-for-step, and how it links with implementation of UNSCR 2254, is a further reason why question marks continue to linger. Without a clearly defined ‘safe, calm, and neutral environment’ concept, and a roadmap to achieving that environment via a step-for-step mechanism, the initiative is unlikely to gain traction.<sup>102</sup>

However, the absence of a clearly defined concept has recently allowed a number of Arab states to embrace the terminology of step-for-step to frame their reengagement with the Assad regime, including a focus on refugee returns, as being in line with UN-legitimised efforts to advance the political process. After a summit of top-level diplomats from Gulf countries as well as Jordan, Iraq and Egypt in Jeddah on 15 April 2023, a contact group to continue consultations was set up in Amman.<sup>103</sup> Two weeks later, the Amman group hosted Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad and published a statement affirming their commitment to finding a solution to the Syrian crisis. Mekdad did not sign the statement, but apparently agreed to attend follow-up meetings to discuss matters of humanitarian aid, security and politics.<sup>104</sup> On 7 May 2023, the Arab League then readmitted the Assad regime, stipulating that the Amman group (plus Lebanon) will form a ministerial group to continue engagement with the regime. Both the Arab League’s Resolution 8914 and the Amman statement made direct references to UNSCR 2254 and used step-for-step wording, but they do not foresee a role for the Syrian opposition.<sup>105</sup> The Amman statement also called for an increase in early recovery assistance in the context of refugee returns. This is despite the fact that safe and dignified returns in line with UNHCR guidelines cannot be achieved as long as substantial questions of governance and security are not tackled seriously.<sup>106</sup> It remains to be seen how substantial the talks about the ‘political situation’ will be that the Amman statement plans to put on

---

102 For suggestions for a concept see: Abdeh, M., Hauch, L., *A new conflict management strategy for Syria*, 2022, online: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/a-new-conflict-management-strategy-for-syria/> (accessed 6 March 2023).

103 See: <https://www.jordannews.jo/Section-20/Middle-East/Arab-committee-to-end-Syrian-crisis-to-be-established-in-Amman-after-Eid-28251> (accessed 26 April 2023).

104 See: <https://mofa.gov.iq/2023/05/?p=37063> (accessed 13 May 2023).

105 See: <https://t1p.de/vpu6v> (accessed 14 May 2023).

106 For details on UNHCR’s protection thresholds and parameters for refugee returns to Syria see: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/comprehensive-protection-and-solutions-strategy-protection-thresholds> (accessed 13 May 2023).

the agenda. However, the regime's record of intransigence and Assad's recent remarks during Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi's visit to Damascus on 3 May 2023 – that there would be 'no more concessions' due to external pressure – suggests that the regime will maintain the course.<sup>107</sup>

The UN Special Envoy now finds himself between the evolved Astana track (whose precursor was endorsed by Pedersen's predecessor) and the Amman process (which verbally anchors itself in UNSCR 2254) without being involved in either of them. If he wants to avoid remaining irrelevant, Pedersen might soon feel tempted to get behind the Amman group or with whatever conflict management understandings might develop from the evolved Astana process. This dynamic is similar to the events of 2018, when the US under Trump turned away from Syria, and Russia used the occasion to push for an initiative to form a Constitutional Committee. The initiative was born in Sochi, and Russia convinced then UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura to play along in return for Moscow's continued cooperation, including putting pressure on the Assad regime to attend negotiations in Geneva. De Mistura decided to jump on board because he wanted to save the UN-sponsored political process. The result was that the political process was narrowed down to a single dimension that was easy for Russia and its client in Damascus to manipulate.<sup>108</sup>

---

107 See: <https://alwatan.sy/archives/344531> (accessed 14 May 2023).

108 In 2017, then UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, introduced the four 'baskets' of governance, constitutional reform, elections and counter terrorism to structure the negotiation efforts.

## 5 Conclusion

The deterioration of relations between the West and Russia due to the invasion of Ukraine has further diminished what little hope might still have existed to agree a power sharing agreement as stipulated in UNSCR 2254. Pedersen sort of acknowledged this deadlock when he noted in October 2022 that the resolution ‘has not been working so far’.<sup>109</sup> Seven years after UNSCR 2254 was adopted, the national and international conflict environment has changed dramatically. Resolving the Syrian crisis today means reconciling a country that is *de facto* divided and socially torn apart. If the political transition stipulated by UNSCR 2254 is out of reach under the prevailing circumstances, the OSE’s major task may be to creatively establish what *could be working* in terms of interim achievements.

Of the five goals<sup>110</sup> that Pedersen set himself, two can be said to have been achieved in terms of process, although not in terms of substance: convening the Constitutional Committee and engaging a wide range of Syrians. No progress has been made on two further goals: the issue of detainees, abductees and missing persons, and making headway on international convergence towards a credible and sustainable settlement. The findings of this research suggest that the reasons lie in a combination of unfavourable circumstances – the primary reason - and the OSE’s own frames, methods and choices – the secondary reason. Pedersen’s final goal of ‘*beginning sustained dialogue with the Syrian government and the opposition about building trust and confidence to establish a safe, calm and neutral environment*’ stands out as relatively neglected and it is here that opportunity lies.

Attempts to create a ‘safe, calm and neutral environment’ (SCNE) are covered by the Envoy’s mandate and arguably constitute a realistic interim conflict management goal if it is understood primarily as an intra-Syrian process that aims to improve relations between the competing areas of control as a starting point, instead of only those between the Assad regime and external

---

<sup>109</sup> See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/transcript-press-stakeout-united-nations-special-envoy-syria-mr-geir-o-pedersen-after-meeting-minister-foreign-affairs-and-expatriates-mr-fayssal-mekdad-17-oct-2022> (accessed 5 February 2023).

<sup>110</sup> For details, see Section 2.

powers. Pedersen has continuously called for an SCNE, but he has not yet conceptualised it by clearly defining and agreeing key terms and objectives with conflict stakeholders. A consultative process has yet to take place to establish the exact criteria for an SCNE and, following from that, a roadmap with concrete milestones and a timeframe that can be presented to the Security Council. Naturally, the Envoy can only work with what he gets from the conflict stakeholders. But at the same time, the fact that conflict stakeholders use official UN positions to legitimise their policies gives the OSE a certain discursive influence. This is the UN's soft power and, even though it may not be strong in the case of the Syrian conflict, neither is it meaningless. This means that instead of criticising diplomats for a lack of creativity and shopping around for possible concessions, the OSE might consider reinventing itself as a thought leader and point of reference for Syria diplomacy. The step-for-step approach in its current form falls well short of doing so because it asks conflict stakeholders to formulate possible concessions without giving them an idea of what they are buying into and where it will lead. The step-for-step approach lacks an overall guiding vision and framework. While constructive ambiguity can be useful, too many ambiguities create heightened risk and uncertainty.

The evolved Astana track and the Amman process have shaken up the diplomatic landscape, but high-level talks, ambitious statements and roadmaps cannot substitute for realistic conflict management frameworks. In its role as mediator, it is high time for the OSE to properly conceptualise an approach to create a safe, calm and neutral environment. The OSE's existing fora and channels with Syrian stakeholders and civil society can be used for initial brainstorming on what this can look like. By recognising the reality of Syria's *de facto* division, and by focusing on the need to create linkages between areas of control through negotiation on matters such as aid, trade, civilian travel, education and disaster recovery, the OSE can offer the opportunity to Syrian combatants and their patrons to test each other's good will on matters that are not considered strategic, without committing to a broader political deal that would expose their interests to new risks. Should trust not be established, the combatants can return to their status quo without loss. The same applies to international actors involved in negotiations, provided they abide by previously agreed policy lines that rule out continued support for initiatives in case of non-compliance from the other side. To facilitate such progress, the OSE should engage in comprehensive discussions with Syrian parties on how to promote safety, calm and neutrality in frontline areas and crossline relations. These consultations should lead to the development of an SCNE roadmap that encompasses mutually beneficial

concessions focusing on intra-Syrian issues. These measures should be viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves, with the ultimate goal being the creation of a conducive environment for reopening big ticket items, in particular governance, when the time is riper.

Even though a negotiated settlement that can end the Syrian conflict is not even remotely in sight, the conflict parties need a safety net and a *modus vivendi* that makes the current stalemate more predictable and more productive. An SCNE approach as outlined above can help create both.