

NOTES

The war in Ukraine and the blown agreement for early recovery in Syria. A missed opportunity

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The agreement has been blown

This is the story of a missed opportunity. Since the end of February 2022, the war in Ukraine and the consequent sharp rift between Russia and the Western community has abruptly interrupted high-level diplomatic efforts aimed at creating the preconditions for a gradual solution to the 11-years long armed conflict in Syria.

The Mediterranean country is devastated by a war that has killed at least half a million people and pushed more than half of the twenty million Syrians to flee their homes, some millions in other Syrian regions, millions more abroad, scattered in the Middle East and beyond. According to the UN, more than 90% of Syrians live in a state of poverty.

At the beginning of 2022 the two global powers involved in the conflict, the United States and Russia, were painstakingly reaching a political compromise to unblock the international impasse on the question of a gradual return of refugees towards areas under governmental control. According to the sources, this return should have been entirely voluntary, the refugees' civil and political rights should have been protected during and after their return, as well as their socio-economic prospects should have been guaranteed in the short, mid and long term.

In view of a possible future return of Syrian refugees in governmental areas, in January 2022 advanced contacts were underway between the United States and Russia to reach a framework agreement allowing the beginning of *early recovery*-labeled humanitarian projects aimed at restoring essential services and basic structures in such areas.

A fragmented territory

The central government of Damascus is represented by President Bashar al-Asad, in power since 2000 and last year re-elected for his fourth term until 2028. Asad's power has been decisively supported for decades by both Russia and Iran.

This alliance controls large portions of the national territory: the Damascus-Aleppo urban backbone, passing through the main capitals of Daraa, Homs, Hama; the Mediterranean coastal region, where Russia has strengthened its historical presence in the Eastern Mediterranean; part of the steppe area between the Euphrates and the Palmyra oasis.

Eastern Syria is controlled by a coalition of Kurdish and Arab forces led by the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), hostile to Turkey and supported by the United States as part of the global anti-Isis coalition.

The jihadist insurrection, formally declared defeated in March 2019, continues to operate and proselytize, carrying out hit-and-run attacks increasingly frequent along the two banks of the Euphrates. In the north-west around Aleppo and in a part of the north-east, Turkey and local forces have controlled much of the territory for years.

The deadlock and the official position of the EU

Seen from this rugged and fragmented terrain, the conflict in Syria has appeared for years and still today without any prospects for a solution. Since 2012, the UN has held a table of mediation between the Damascus government and exiled oppositions. Despite the efforts of a series of high-level UN officials, the UN envoys have few tools to leverage the parties involved in the conflict. Since 2018, the position of UN special envoy for Syria has been held by the experienced Norwegian diplomat Geir Pedersen, who tries to keep alive the only negotiating forum formally still active: the inter-Syrian Constitutional Committee.

This inter-Syrian body, composed of 150 members (50 pro-government, 50 pro-exiled oppositions, 50 representatives of the 'civil society') was founded back in 2019 after Russia took the helm of the international diplomatic initiative on Syria with the consensus of the United States.

It should be noted that 2015 UN Security Council resolution n. 2254, which provided for the gradual achievement of a political solution to the armed conflict, still remains the main regulatory and diplomatic reference for most of the international and regional actors involved in the Syrian crisis.

According to UN resolution n.2254, the constitutional committee should have been formed at the end (and not at the beginning) of the initial post-armed conflict period characterized by a nationwide armed truce. Nowadays, even after eight subsequent Constitutional Committees meetings in Geneva, the war still rages over large Syrian territories.

After almost three years of unsuccessful UN mediated negotiations, it became clear that the Moscow-led initiative, embodied by the Constitutional Committee, aims to gain time without helping to create, either from above or from below, the conditions for a gradual and political solution to the conflict.

This impasse favors not only Russia but all the other forces that, inside and outside Syria, have been betting for years on territorial division and on the exploitation, in a short-term perspective, of the resources of the territory in the center of the Middle East.

The European Union, which instead seems interested in breaking this deadlock, remains anchored to its political line, crystallized on the positions of the first years of the Syrian crisis: no intervention for the reconstruction of Syria before the start of a political transition in the country. As if to say, Brussels does not intend to provide political legitimacy to the Asad government by investing in the reconstruction of the local and strategic infrastructures of the Mediterranean country.

The missed opportunity

In light of this stalemate, diplomats and officials of European development countries' cooperation agencies have pushed for a medium-term compromise between the parties involved to start *early recovery* projects in the areas under government control. The agreement provided that the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), which has always kept its channels open with Damascus, would offer formal and logistical coverage to the action supported by Russia, the United States and by the European Union.

The launch of these projects would have sent signals of openness to Damascus and its Russian partner. In exchange, Moscow would have ensured periodic approval of the UN resolution to keep open the cross-border channel of humanitarian aid from Turkey to areas of the north-west, out of government control and under Turkish influence.

This would have been a tactical, not necessarily strategic, exchange between Washington and Moscow. In fact, the negotiations did not concern the political and institutional future of Syria, nor were they explicitly aimed at ending the war and starting peace.

The steps forward made between 2021 and the beginning of 2022 were apparently minimal, yet they could have constituted the first slab of a floor to be built to generate trust between the parties, inside and outside Syria.

The Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the stance taken by the United States and its international allies have had inevitable repercussions, including on the parable of the failure to agree on *early recovery* in Syria. The Syrian events that followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine adamantly showed the fragility of the entente between Moscow and Washington.

Since March, Moscow has left more room for Iran to expand into central Syria and the south-western regions, troubling US interests. Starting from April, Washington strengthened its positions in the Northeast, and so did Russia. Since April, Turkey has obtained more room for maneuver to intensify attacks against the PKK in Syria and neighboring Iraq. In May, the United States decided to lift some trade sanctions on Syrian partners in the north-east and north-west, effectively deepening the commercial, social and political fragmentation between Syrian regions divided by military trenches. Again, in May Russia has announced that it does not intend to vote in favor, in the Security Council, for the resolution that extends the green light for cross-border humanitarian aid from Turkey to the Idlib region.

In the face of these politico-military developments, at the April Brussels international conference on Syria and the region, 75% of the promised funds came from the European Union and from European donors. This constitutes an expression of Euro-Mediterranean interests once again defeated by a trajectory on a global scale based on short term military and political confrontation.