



Pugwash Conversations on Geneva II

Dubai, 1-2 March 2014

Summary of Main Points¹

During the weekend of March 1, 2014, Pugwash Secretary General Paolo Cotta-Ramusino held a series of private conversations in Dubai with Syrians and international experts concerning potential avenues for Track II ideas for defusing and resolving the Syrian crisis.

These conversations used as starting point the conclusions of a Pugwash meeting on [Geneva II and the Syrian crisis](#), held in Geneva on January 28, 2014, and were aimed at the preparation of future Pugwash meetings on this topic.

Background

The situation in Syria appears to be deteriorating. It is generally considered that the level of hostilities in Syria is very much extreme. On one side there is increasingly a desire for revenge, and on the other side a strong fear of defeat and of physical extermination. Both of these elements are exacerbating the conflict and making compromise for a political solution extremely difficult. For instance, the Alawites fear for their physical survival and would need to be reassured about their role in the future Syria. On the other hand there is an understandable desire for revenge on the part of those who have suffered as a result of the actions of the government and its allies. There is a need to bring to justice the people responsible for atrocities, but the cycle of revenge needs to be broken.

In the Geneva meeting, and in the Dubai conversations, it was emphasised that to allow a realistic chance of resolution, the conflict in Syria must be viewed with a good degree of impartiality, and not from one side or another, reach a lasting resolution.

Economic Elements of the Crisis

- The war has led to a fragmentation of the national economy into a series of local economies. In rural areas the typical radius of economic activity is now about 70km, in urban areas it can be as small as 3km. This has reduced the importance of Damascus to the country as a whole.
- Against this background, there has been economic cooperation between different groups, including between (lower levels of) government and opposition, mostly driven by the need for survival, for example in the production and distribution of electricity in some places.

¹ This report was prepared by Martin Butcher, Policy Advisor on Arms, Oxfam, who has sole responsibility for the content. The conversations were held according to traditional Pugwash/Chatham House rules: people were speaking in their individual capacities; statements are not attributed to any individual; and distribution of the substance of discussions is encouraged.

There is also cooperation in provision of social services. Such cooperation could be a basis for future cooperation towards a political solution to the conflict.

- One way to assist Syria on a regional or local level would be to identify such economic or social services cooperation, and for the international community to support it in a neutral way, on whichever side of conflict lines it is occurring. This would be one way of questioning the problem of the control of the war economy by different armed groups.

Government and Opposition Weakness

- Beyond economic activity, this fragmentation affects all areas of government and economy, so that there is now a much reduced reliance on the centralised state. However, while the reach of the central State has shrunk, it continues to function in many ways and is more resilient than expected by outsiders two years ago. Importantly, it continues to pay salaries. This is a significant factor in maintaining State control of some areas. It is not in the interests of Syria for an Iraq-style de-Baathification of government structures to happen.
- A complicating factor in resolving the conflict is a clear lack of leaders of different groups able to control the situation. Even official leaders like President Assad have limited influence. The fragmented nature of the opposition also reflects the lack of legitimate leaders on their side. This is a complicating factor in mediation for conflict resolution in Syria.
- The different parties in the conflict are locked in a 'balance of weakness', with no victory in sight for any side. Outside parties supporting one side or another must appreciate that there is little prospect of an outright victory for any party to the conflict, and that a mediated political solution will be the only way to end the crisis.

Proposals for a political process towards peace

When we talk about a political solution, it means a reconciliation or a semi-democratic process of transition which can satisfy many different actors. Local processes and ceasefires should continue, and the delivery of humanitarian aid should be facilitated. Because the war is too costly of human life and resources, all parties should work towards reconciliation with tolerance and dialogue. If there can be a transitional political deal that can facilitate reconciliation, that would be important. There are common denominators that many can agree on. Transition should move step by step from these to more difficult issues.

- It has been suggested that a national conference on the Afghan 'loya jirga' model might be a way forward. This might be able to rebuild the legitimacy of all levels of government, to construct a new national consensus that can replace the old, broken one. This needs support from the international community.
- It is vital to deal with the countries engaged in the Syrian conflict, notably Russia, Iran and the US. They must be involved in a solution to the crisis. There is no reason to single out Iran as a negative element, or any other country for that matter. All parties must be accepted as a part of a solution.
- To facilitate this process, foreign fighters should leave the territory of Syria.

- In the Geneva Pugwash meeting, we had significant discussion of local ceasefires and their potential as building blocks towards a peace process. In Dubai, it was suggested that there is a possibility of using areas of local ceasefire as 'entry points' for humanitarian assistance, and overlaid with points of economic cooperation across battle lines, there may be a significant possibility of building a political process based on those who are talking and cooperating in such areas. With outside support, this process can be organised from below. Leaders from the many different faith traditions that have lived together in Syria for centuries may be well placed to play a role in a process of national reconciliation.
- It has been suggested that a medium sized country, or group of countries, not engaged in supporting one side or another in the conflict may be in a better position to lead mediation between the Syrian and international parties to the conflict.

Future Dialogue

Pugwash was encouraged to organise future meetings in the region and also in relevant capitals on disparate aspects of the crisis, including discussions with outside parties.

- The concerns raised by some Syrians around participation in discussions on the future of their country shows the difficulties that must be overcome to take dialogue forward, but it is important to maintain dialogue between expatriate Syrians and those who remain inside the country, including especially key parts of civil society and other non-militarized segments of society. The contribution of those living in Syria is vital to a political process, and it will be important to find a way to involve all Syrians fully in dialogue for a solution to the conflict.
- It is important not to compete with other processes but to be cooperative and complementary. The situation does not give cause for optimism in the short term, and equally it would be wrong to believe that a solution can be found through one direction or party to the conflict only.
- The Syrian population is paying a heavy price for this conflict. It is urgent and timely to engage in further Track II dialogue on ways forward.