

Oases of peace and prosperity in war torn Syria

Today Syria is faced with a deadlock. The constitutional committee is not making any substantial progress. The situation is getting out of control with Russia and Turkey facing off in Idlib. There are around one million refugees stuck on the Turkish borders and they have no way to go to. Europe had reached its capacity in accepting refugees so is the situation with neighbouring countries. The only solution for the time being is to create safe zones inside Syria where the refugees can be accommodated. Also, those safe zones or de-escalation zones will be zones of economic prosperity that can have a spill over the entire Syrian population without breaking the generally agreed principle of no reconstruction without proper political transition.

According to the UN ESCWA estimates the most 2 probable scenarios for this conflict are : “reaching peaceful resolution of the conflict with lingering hostilities between the parties, or new limited conflicts that emerge over division of power, influence and resources .This might be the most realistic scenario and the best to adopt” .The second most probable scenario “or the worst case scenario. It assumes that the conflict will worsen and spoilers will have worse impact, which will compromise the peace process and cause the total collapse of the state”.

In both creating a space where people can live in peace is necessary not only for Syria but also for regional stability. This will facilitate the containment of the conflict within the Syrian borders.

Several parties have spoken about safe zones or de-escalation zones without giving details on how these ideas can be executable and made viable in a sustainable manner in the midst of a violent armed conflict.

The key is to create zones of safety, neutrality and prosperity where IDP (internally displaced people) can be accommodated and where they can thrive.

To start with those areas, in order to provide real security to people, they need to be demilitarised. Though the UN failed to convince the different stakeholders to lay down their arms, it might be able to do that in certain areas in Syria. Hence, these areas should be forbidden to any armed factions taking part in the conflict. Instead security should be maintained by a UN special peace keeping mission, similar to the UNIFIL in south Lebanon. However, this mission will not be an observer mission it will have the authority to protect civilians and to search and inspect private property in order to insure rule of law and security. In order to ensure neutrality, it is important that countries that donate the forces not to be involved in the conflict i.e. they don't have boots on the ground. It is also important that those countries do not have direct interest in Syria. This way people can relocate to those zones without fearing arbitrary detention.

The concept is a type of chartered city under the jurisdiction of the United Nations. However, each zone or city is a compounded project held between the UN, the private and the non-governmental sector. Given the fluidity of the situation, and given that so far there is no final winner and no final loser, the UN represents the most eligible counterpart to contract interested stakeholders.

Location: The chartered cities will be located in buffer zones between warring factions. This will also help deescalate the conflict. One suggested buffer zone. Is on the M5 highway, the area going from Maarat Al Numan to Sarakeeb, the other one is the city of Menbej

The security will be held by UN peace keeping forces. Those in their turn will recruit and manage locals for policing activities.

The administration of these cities will be held jointly between the elected local councils and appointed personnel. Volunteering countries, that, as said before do not have military presence in Syria and do not support any armed factions and hence are considered neutral can offer help through a city to city agreement. For example, the state of Kuwait can nominate the municipality of Kuwait to help with the administration of the city of Jarablus. The sister city will appoint members to run jointly the city with the elected city council. They are supposed to work with the civil society organisation as well with the executive council appointed by the elected local council.

Economy and reconstruction: Here, there is a space for the private sector to take a role. In this respect, the UN through its leverage with the international community should offer incentives for companies that operate in these cities. Incentives could be tax exemptions for products originating from these cities etc...The reconstruction in the borders of these cities provide a viable economic zone for Syrian without breaking the UN principle of no reconstruction before having a political transition.

Hopefully, those chartered cities will multiply and help decrease the conflict zone within Syria. They also offer a graceful exit for the different warring parties that are worn out by the conflict.