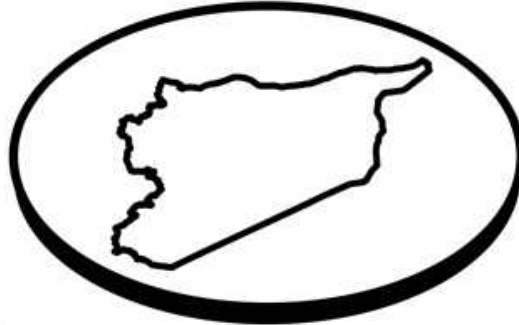


مشاورات بين مختلف الأطراف دعماً لحل سياسي

All Sides

Consultation for a Political Solution



Vienna / Castle of Schlaining, 7-10 March, 2014
Final Report



International Initiative for a Political Solution in Syria

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YES
TO DEMOCRACY.
NO
TO FOREIGN INTERVENTION.



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Call for Peace in Syria

Syrians coming from most diverse social, educational, political and national backgrounds have gathered on March 8th and 9th in the Castle of Schlaining, Austria, in the framework of an “All Sides Consultation for a Political Solution in Syria” organized by the International Initiative www.peaceinsyria.org.

Driven by deep worries about the deteriorating developments, the disastrous humanitarian situation and the future of the Syrian people, the All Sides Consultation has been searching for what can be done, by means of a political solution, to stop the war, the violation of human rights causing a huge number of victims, the destruction of infrastructure and culture. This solution should help the Syrians to find a new social contract for the construction of a State based on comprehensive national reconciliation and accountability, guaranteeing the rights and freedom for all Syrians.

Recognizing the immense complexity of the situation and the increasing suffering and polarization, following points emerged as consensual during our deliberations. As conveners we are formulating them in the spirit of the discussions:

1. Based on the principle of the sovereignty of the Syrian people we call for cease fires by all participants of the war and demand all non-Syrian armed forces to leave the Syrian territories.
2. We appeal to stop the war, emphasizing that a political solution is the best solution for all participants. This solution implies guaranteeing for everybody basic political, economic and social rights leading towards social justice and the release of political prisoners and hostages from all sides.
3. We want to search for realistic and practical methods and procedures in order to realize an “All side’s peace conference” which includes all Syrian parts involved in this crisis.
4. We will work on all levels in order to satisfy the urgent and necessary needs of the civilians including safe delivery of human aid.

5. Particularly we will work on bringing back the refugees and emigrants to Syria and to find ways of providing them with the necessary means of living in regions that are safe from war and military activities.

6. To work on finding a space that can be used as a center for the peace process and where a constant and open dialogue can take place. This will be named “The Syrian House of Peace.”

7. We will constitute a Network for Peace in Syria including both, Syrians of all walks of live as well as non-Syrians, supporting a political solution.

Furthermore following issues and positions have been discussed without reaching consensus and therefore need to be referred to a next conference:

The way how to find a just and comprehensive solution for the Kurdish question in order to guarantee equal civil rights while maintaining the unity of the Syrian people and State?

In which way equal rights between women and men can be established guaranteeing full rights for women?

Initiative for a Political Solution

www.peaceinsyria.org

Vienna, March 20th, 2014

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Syrian Participants

Name	Profession	Location
Abdelrazak Alloush	"National Call"	Deir e Zor
Abdulmanem Harah	Responsible of medical centers in Aleppo, member of the Civil Council of Aleppo	Aleppo
Ali Assaad Watfe	Former dean faculty for educational science, well-known in academia across the Arab world	Hama
Aref Dalila	Long-time opposition activist, former dean of the Damascus faculty of economics	Damascus
Ayman Kahef	Editor-in-chief syriandays.net	Hama
Bassam Aouil	Professor for psychology	Homs
Fateh Jamous	"Coalition for Peaceful Change"	Lattakia
Hend Mujali	Profiled leftist activist	Daraa
Khaled Issa	Democracy activist jounge generation	Hama
Marie-Thérèse Kiriaky	Women activist	Damascus
Mohamed Alsayed	Sheikh, activist, close to "Local Co-ordination Committees" (LCC) Aleppo	Aleppo
Monzer Halloum	Activist, professor, writer with strong coastal influence	Lattakia
Naser Al Ghazali	Human rights activist (Damascus centre for Theoretical and Civil rights studies)	Daraa
Nawal al Yaziji	Committee of Syrian Women, "Communist Party" (Yussuf Faysal)	Homs / Marmarita
Nidal al Dibs	Film maker	Sweida
Osama Alsamman	Young activist from Tal	rural Damascus
Otared Haidar	Scholar and academic at Oxford University	Salamieh / Hama
Samir Abullaban	Member Political Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood	Homs
Serbest Nabi	University professor in Arbil, independent Kurdish intellectual	Qamshli
Tareq Aziziyeh	Young activist, Jesuit university Damascus	Homs
Waseem Haddad	Religious studies scholar	Tartous
Xalid Issa	European spokesman "Democratic Union Party" (PYD)	Darbasiyah



International Participants

Name	Profession	Location	Role
Mohamed Abu-Nimer	Senior Adviser King Abdullah Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)	Austria	Observer
Alvaro Amb. Albacete	Special Adviser King Abdullah Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)	Austria	Observer
Emanuel Aydin	Syriac Orthodox Bishop Vienna	Austria	Observer
Alejandro Bendaña	Peace-building expert, Centro de Estudios Internacionales Managua	Nicaragua	Initiative for a Political Solution
David Frazer	Universal Peace Federation	Ireland	Observer
Leo Gabriel	Social Anthropologist	Austria	Initiative for a Political Solution
Wolfgang Gehrcke	MP Die Linke	Germany	Observer
Peter Haider	Universal Peace Federation	Austria	Observer
Maximilian Lakitsch	Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR)	Austria	Observer
Wilhelm Langthaler	Author	Austria	Initiative for a Political Solution
Eilert Lund Rostrup	Karibu NGO	Norway	Observer
Alistair Macdonald-Radcliff	Senior Adviser King Abdullah Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)	Austria	Observer
Michel Nseir	World Council of Churches	Lebanon	Observer
Vangelis Pissias	Professor, organiser Gaza flotilla	Greece	Initiative for a Political Solution
Christiane Reymann	Journalist	Germany	Initiative for a Political Solution



Civil Society Consultation for a Political Solution In Syria

From March 7th to 10th, 2014 in Vienna and Burg Schlaining

General objective and history of the symposium

Since approx. one year the promoters of the international peace initiative www.peaceinsyria.org have mobilized a great number of peace activists and outstanding personalities of political and cultural life in Europe, Asia and Latin America¹ – all of them deeply convinced that a military solution of the Syrian conflict is neither possible nor desirable.

Gathering around a common platform under the title: YES TO DEMOCRACY – NO TO MILITARY INTERVENTION the promoters of this initiative went in different occasions to Damascus, Beirut, Istanbul and Aleppo in order to contact the main political actors from each side: the president, his advisors and some of his ministers on the one side and representatives of the Syrian National Coalition, the National Body for Democratic Change and the Free Syrian Army on the other. Finally a high ranking delegation consisting of 13 personalities from 9 different countries of Europe and Latin America visited Damascus in June, 2013 proposing to the government and the opposition there to initiate in the near future a POLITICAL DIALOG among representatives the Syrian civil society in order to create the conditions for a political settlement in the framework of a of a “Civil society consultation for a political solution of the conflict in Syria”, which due to the extreme polarisation and militarisation of the conflict, cannot be held inside the country.

In various meetings of representatives of the initiative with the government as well as with leaders of the opposition, a clear preference was given to Austria as a meeting ground for being a neutral country. The conference will be held at the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Stadtschlaining, where several peace initiatives took place in the past.

¹ Amongst others the Peace Nobel Prize winners Adolfo Perez Esquivel (Argentina), Rigoberta Menchú (Guatemala), Bishop Raúl Vera (Mexico), the authors Jean Ziegler (Switzerland), Tariq Ali (GB), Francois Houtart (Belgium) and Ignacio Ramonet (Spain), experts in peace building like Hans von Sponeck (Germany) and Alejandro Bendaña (Nicaragua), parliamentarians like Walden Bello (Philippines), Wolfgang Gehrcke (Germany) and Odysseus Voudouris (Greece), and peace activists like Evangelis Pissias (Greece), Mireille Fanon Mendes France (France), Leo Gabriel (Austria) and Wilhelm Langthaler (Austria).

To all of the actors mentioned above it has been clear however that at the difference of the negotiations which are promoted and organized by the United Nations in the framework of the so called Geneva-process this symposium in Austria should have a deliberative character, involving only Syrian actors willing to engage in a political dialog about the future design of an eventual transition period as well as discussing the immediate measures to be adopted in order to diminish the loss of human lives and the destruction of the country as a whole.

The structure of the Consultation and the selection of the participants

According to an agreement of all parts involved in this project the participants of the symposium are going to be personalities and activists close to the civil population on the ground and not representatives from the hierarchies of political organisations. This implies that a variety of sectors like religious confessions, educational and health-care institutions, different ethnicities (e.g. Kurdish population), women, workers and small or bigger businesses etc. from different parts of the country are going to be present at the Conference, although each of the participants only speaks for him/herself and not on behalf of the institutions which they eventually represent.

The initiative www.peaceinsyria.org has contacted, in the last eight months, many political, social, cultural and civil groups in Syria, who believe in the necessity of a political solution and are willing to contribute in a face-to-face dialog without any interference from the outside. The initiative has also contacted a great number of personalities from different geographical, political and cultural areas who are acting within the scenario of the Syrian conflict. From those people of different backgrounds and associations some have been selected according to the following criteria:

- 1) Although different personalities are members or participants in political organizations they should speak only on behalf of themselves and not as representatives of their organizations. That's why the top leaders of State institutions and/or political organizations have not been invited.
- 2) The initiative had in mind to invite personalities from as many different regions and confessional denominations as possible, including those who, because of the conflict, have

chosen to live temporarily in other countries.

3) The Commission took into account that the personalities should belong to different social groups with different cultural backgrounds, economic standing and religious affiliations.

4) A particular importance was given to the participation of women.

5) Finally the lists with proposed guests have been shown to directorates of the political groups involved in order to get the mutual acceptance of the whole audience.

The organizers of the symposium are very conscious about the fact that the equilibrium of numbers of participants according to these criteria could not always be maintained because of economic, political and security considerations. One should bear in mind that the symposium with its deliberative character can only be a step in a process which will hopefully go on after the event.

During the Consultation also some of the international promoters of the initiative from different countries of the world are going to be present, some of them as facilitators of the panel discussions and/or as observers who only should intervene in the discussions which are programmed specifically for them due to the overarching understanding that the peace-process should be led essentially by the representatives of the Syrian civil society.

The program of the Symposium

Like the selection of the participants also the subject-matters to be discussed at the conference have been chosen beforehand by a common agreement of all parties and parts involved. According to the general objectives of the Conference a special priority should be given to the most urgent needs of the Syrian population.



Leo Gabriel addressing the media conference



Ali Watfe, Fateh Jamous



Arif Dalila, Xaled Issa



Otared Haidar, Tareq Azziziyeh



Samir Abulaban, Hind Mujali

Consultation for a Political Solution to the Syrian Conflict

March 8-9, Burgschlaining

Saturday, March 8th

10:00 – 11:00

Opening

- Maximilian Lakitsch, Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution
- Leo Gabriel, International Initiative for a Political Solution of the Syrian Conflict
- Naser al Ghazali, Preparation Team “Consultation for a Political Solution”

11:00 – 13:30

First panel: The needs for security

Starting with the present military situations on the ground and after the discussions in Geneva several questions arise: what can civil-society do to support local cease-fires? How can free access be guaranteed for humanitarian organisations to deliver their aid? In which way war-prisoners and hostages can be reintegrated in the Syrian society? Should foreign fighters abandon the country?

Introducing:

- Fateh Jamous, Coalition for Peaceful Change
- Samir Aboullaban, Muslim Brother from Homs
- Tarek Azize, Reseracher and writer
- Munzer Halloum, professor, activist, writer

Moderation:

- Alejandro Bendaña, former Nicaraguan government speaker, Center for International Studies, Managua
- Wilhelm Langthaler, organisational committee Initiative for a Political Solution



Serbest Nabi addressing the press conference

15h:00 – 17:00

Second panel: The need to bridge the rifts

Given the deepening splits the Syrian society is suffering through the war the questions arise: How can sectarianism be overcome? What can civil society do to maintain its cultural diversity while rebuilding unity? How can mutual acceptance and trust can be restored? And last but not least: how can the cultural heritage be preserved from further destruction?

Introducing:

- Ali Assaad Watfe, former dean for educational science
- Serbest Nabi, professor in Arbil
- Bassam Aouil, professor for psychology
- Otared Haidar, scholar Oxford
- Nidal al Dibs, film maker

Moderation:

- François Houtart, cofounder of the World Forum for Alternative and professor at the National Institute of Higher Studies of Ecuador, Belgium
- Leo Gabriel, organisational committee Initiative for a Political Solution

17:30 – 19:30

Third panel: The needs of people on the move

Given the fact that nearly half of the population are fleeing the violence towards other parts of the country or outside of Syria the question arises: what can and should be done to guarantee the survival of the masses of refugees in terms of health care, food supply and hygienic conditions? But also: what should be done in order to guarantee to the people their right to return to their homes?

Introducing:

- Abdulmanem Harah, responsible of medical centers in Aleppo, member of the Civil Council of Aleppo
- Hend Mujali, activist
- Naser Al Ghazali, human rights activist (Damascus centre for Theoretical and Civil rights studies)
- Nawal al Yaziji, Committee of Syrian Women

Moderation:

- Christiane Reymann, journalist and author, Germany
- Wilhelm Langthaler, Initiative for a Political Solution Political Solution

Consultation for a Political Solution to the Syrian Conflict

March 8-9, Burgschlaining

Sunday, March 9th

9h:00 – 11:00

Interaction with international observers

This is the moment when international observers can intervene by asking questions, making proposals and enhancing the discussion between Syrian and international participants on any topic of the symposium.

Moderation:

- Sarah Marusek, activist and scholar, USA / England
- Michel Nseir, World Council of Churches (WCC programme executive for the Middle East, Lebanon

11:30 – 13:30

Fourth panel: the need for political rights

Given the situation that, due to the war, in many regions the constitutionally guaranteed political rights have been suspended either legally or factually, the question arises: How can in a close future a truly participatory democracy be put into practice? This question includes the freedom of association and the freedom of expression, the right to form local and regional autonomies, but above all it tackles the problem of political representation and the guarantee of free elections.

Introducing:

- Arif Dalila, for dean of Damascus faculty of economics
- Xaled Issa, European spokesman PYD
- Abdelhadi Alloush, National Call
- Ayman Kahef, editor-in-chief syriandays.net

Moderation:

- Wolfgang Gehrcke, MP Die Linke, Germany
- Wilhelm Langthaler, organisational committee Initiative for a Political Solution



Monzer Halloum

15:00 – 18:00

Fifth panel: The need for a political transition

This very controversial subject has been dealt with in Geneva, but could not reach any agreement at all. What can civil society do, in order to put into practice a realistic model for a transitional period to come off the ground which reflects somehow the will of the majority of the population? What can be the role of the international community in implementing this model?

Moderation:

- Vangelis Pissias, professor of water management and coordinator of the Gaza Flotilla, Greece
- Leo Gabriel, organisational committee Initiative for a Political Solution

Monday, March 10th

11:00

Media Conference

Presseklub Concordia, Bankgasse 8, Vienna



Osama Alsamman, Abdelmanem Harah, Marie-Thérèse Kiriaky

Speech of Leo Gabriel at the inauguration of the “All sides Consultation on a political solution in Syria”

held on March 8th, 2014

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, participants,

Since one year and a half our initiative www.peaceinsyria.org has been working on a dream whose realization you represent. It is the dream that military conflict can be overcome by the will of the people, by the will of civil society.

“Peace is just a matter which is far too important to be left to the politicians”, we were always saying in the World Social Forum which is this worldwide gathering of social movements, of NGO’s, of non-governmental instances which somehow reflect the spirit of the ground, the spirit of the people an international scale.

By the way, talking about the World Social Forum, the last conference, which I had the great pleasure of organizing and which also took place here in the Castle of Schlaining, in 1998. There are even some of my friends here today who participated in that conference.. And although that conference was not bigger than this one, the idea of the World Social Forum has been conceived here, before becoming the big gathering which has taken place on different continents, first in Porto Alegre, Brasil, then in Mumbai, India and the latest took place in Tunis. This was conceived in this room.

And what I am dreaming about is that also this meeting is going to be the “kick-off” for a longer process which gives the main role to civil society actors. That is why we call it “Consultation of Civil Society”. At the difference to the “Political Society” which is a system of representatives, more or less democratic, the civil society speaks for itself. For instance in the World Social Forum, at the beginning, one of the big trade unionists of France was saying, when somebody else was contradicting him: “You don’t know whom you’re speaking to! I represent 200.000 workers, so my opinion is stronger than your opinion.” However, according to the rules we established from the very beginning in the World Social Forum, everybody should speak for himself/herself. Because we knew that although we belong to different kinds of organizations and we reflect that in our reflection, we should not speak according to a preconceived “power code”, which means that one’s opinion is bigger than another’s opinion because of the power he or she represents.

This is the first point I want to propose for this conference: Everybody speaks on behalf of him or herself and not on the behalf of others. The second point I want to propose is that in this conference we make as little as possible claims to the powerful.

In the past, unfortunately, it has been shown that the powerful don’t react much to these claims. Therefore we should not waste our time to project our wishful thinking to those who are in power, may it be Russia, the USA, Iran or Saudi Arabia etc. I am not so megalomaniac to think they will listen to what I say! Instead the center of the conference should be: What can we do as civil society, inside Syria and outside Syria, in order to promote Peace?

Yesterday we had a very interesting tour in this wonderful castle here, where all of a sudden we saw a sentence written on a wall: “Peace is more than just the absence of war Peace is also social justice, democracy and the respect for the other’s religions or believes.” All of that is part of Peace.

And in this sense I hope that our minds should be geared forward to this vision that peace is a possibility. Peace is a real possibility already now we can talk about and ask ourselves, what could we do in the different fields of action. These fields of action and of reflection you can find in the program of the conference. They are structured according to the different needs of the people: the needs of security, the needs of culture, the needs of the refugees, the needs of democratic reconstruction not only after the war but also while the war is going on; and finally the need for some kind of political transition.

At the difference to the Geneva-Process where the two powers of Syria, the government and the opposition were articulated in two delegations we are covering altogether a much broader range of civil society. In Geneva they were confronting each other, because they were very much underlining the question: “Who is going to be in the transitional government?”, or: “What is the best formula for the so called “power sharing””? In our conference we will also talk about that, but we will leave this to the very end of the conference and first of all deal with the needs of the people.



Dear participants,

I think there is a common claim inside Syria and outside of Syria that is the claim that this war has to stop. This is the sense of our initiative, when we define ourselves as “a sort of a movement for a political negotiation, as a movement of civil society to enhance the possibilities for a political solution”.

Therefore we should claim that all people, in one way or the other should participate in these efforts. Some of them could not come, because, as they say in Spanish “los poderes facticos” (the powers of reality) did not allow them to participate here. But those who are here came, because they agree with the need for what we have called an “All Sides Consultation for a Political Solution”.

You are coming from the most diverse sectors of Syrian society. And I don't speak only politically. I speak culturally, regionally and economically. You come from different regions, belong to different classes and political milieus. You are a true mosaic and it is this mosaic I've always appreciated so much when I went to Syria, because you are coming from a culture of great diversity, which is reflected somehow in this room.

And as somebody who is not just starting out with his life, but has passed already some years already in these efforts of peace-building in different parts of the world I want to ask you a last favor, which -I know - is very, very difficult to grant! Don't look back so much! I think it is inevitable to look back. But let's not waste too much time discussing what happened in the past? Who is the guilty one? . Not because this would not be important. I am convinced that one day these questions have to be dealt with, but our task here is a much bigger one here. Our task is to look forward in order to discover the real concrete possibilities for a sustainable Peace, which is not just a “peace” in abstract terms, but a real goal which we only can achieve step by step.

The format of our discussions is very easy to understand. We have broken down the problem, the problems into five chapters. And in each of these chapters, - you find them in the Program-outline -, we asked four participants to intervene, but not to give a key-note speech - just to get the discussion going. This is not a conference like many academic conferences where everybody gets to speak once and everybody talks for at least half an hour and the others listen... No! We would really like your participation around the table in the most lively and dynamic way possible. And this will be only possible if you stick to a certain time-frame:

we ask you to limit yourself in this initial statement to five minutes for each intervention and then in the responses try to make three minutes. So that others also can react to each other and can make this discussion as fruitful and lively as possible.

We, from the initiative peaceinsyria.org, some of them are present here, will take up the moderation of the discussion. We won't explain to you how Syria should be or how it is, because you know that far better than we do. We just want to facilitate this dialogue among the different actors around the table and to ask you to keep in mind our common objective: to establish a consensus around this table. I know it's difficult.

We, in the World Social Forum took up the old practice of the indigenes people who refused to be conducted by a majority rule. Because they say: “If there is a majority than there is also a minority and the minority will always feel bad by being overruled by the majority”. That's why there is never a voting-process. The art consists in changing one's proposals in a way that finally you can reach the other, reach a consensus. And if we really have the light of Peace in front of us it will be all the much easier to sometime renounce to the formulation on some particularity which the others would not accept. Let's find a common ground. Let's find a consensus. So we can say to the outside world and perhaps at the press conference on Monday: “Although the constituency has been so diverse, as you are, it has reached a consensus on certain important points”.

This consensus can be reached easier if your interventions are oriented by proposals; not so much on what the others should do, but - as I said at the beginning - what we can do. We, as part of civil society.

Already by listening to you and seeing your friendly eyes now I am pretty sure, that this meeting, that this consultation has the chance to be a historic step, if we manage not to fall back to the old schemes of contradicting each other at any price and accept the new light of peace-building from the perspective of civil society.

Consultation for a Political Solution to the Syrian Conflict

On the spirit emerging from the “All Sides Consultation for Political Solution” in Vienna

By Wilhelm Langthaler, Co-convener PeaceinSyria.org

Now that the “All sides Consultation for a Political Solution in Syria” is accomplished and is being recognized by all the participants as a success that deserves continuation, the time has come to draw a balance not only of the conference itself, but also of its wider significance. The very fact that around two dozen people from the most diverse and conflicting backgrounds of Syrian society came together and consulted how to overcome the civil war tearing apart the country is extraordinary. But the spirit emerging from the debates reaches far beyond the objective of this single event, giving hope that a movement for a political solution is gaining momentum.

Exchange among the people – not power-brokering

First of all, let us recall the aim of the “All Sides Consultation for a Political Solution” which took place in the “Peace Castle Schlaining” close to Vienna, Austria, from 7-10 March, 2014. The idea was to give a voice to Syrian society in its full diversity, voices emerging from the people who have been silenced and excluded by the powerful. It was not intended to hold negotiations between the conflicting sides and their global and regional sponsors as has failed in Geneva. A consultative forum of personalities not directly representing the sides involved but indeed representing the societal richness was called upon to explore ways to stop the catastrophic bloodshed.

Thus we were not in search of sophisticated and well-balanced formulae of compromise pleasing the foreign powers involved (something which might, however, be necessary to reach in other places), but to give answers concerning how the full rights of the people might be guaranteed. The quest for these rights is what is thought to have sparked the conflict and is at the same time key to ending what has turned into a fratricidal war pitting the components of society against the other, a conflict additionally fuelled by massive international involvement. As Naser al Ghazali, one of the Syrian members of the preparatory committee hailing from Daraa, put it in his introduction: “Democratic rights are not negotiable. It is like pregnancy – you cannot be half pregnant as we will not accept less than full rights.”

The meeting was all about understanding the grievances of the diverse social, political, cultural and confessional components and to develop the mutual trust necessary to reach a ceasefire and to maintain it. “We are contemplating elements of a new social contract,” as Serbest Nabi, a Kurdish professor of philosophy teaching in Erbil and Mardin, commented.

Tokens of mutual acceptance

“Once when I had to relocate, I donated my library for the use of the community by giving it to the local mosque. So together with my pious friend I checked the books one by one to see whether they were suited or not.” This allegory was recounted to the consultation by the Syrian filmmaker Nidal al Dibs from Sweida, reminding us of a contemporary version of Lessing’s ring parable which happens to be a symbol of European enlightenment.

This cautious but all the more powerful message was understood and adopted by all sides and can exemplify the spirit of the event. Though different, the secular and Islamic camps come together to explore their congruencies. The secularist takes the exigencies of the pious Muslim into account even if he might disagree. The pious friend, who may well have also been a partisan of political Islam, for his part accepts that there are acknowledged positions, milieus and cultures that do not belong to realm of the mosque.

This constitutive principle for the consultation was already recognised implicitly by the very composition of the participants. There were people siding with the government or regarding it as the minor evil, there were what can be called soft and hard opposition inside the country, there were Islamic personalities and Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, there were personalities close to the Coalition, there were Kurds from the different currents. Some came from government-held areas, some from regions under the control of the rebels, some from the Kurdish-dominated north and others from abroad. There were men and women, old and young, affiliated with all the confessional groups, as well as die-hard secularists, comprising the full mosaic of Syria. People pursuing different professions were present: from university professors to grassroots relief workers, from doctors and students to

writers and politicians; many of whom are former political prisoners, some even having served decades behind bars.

The necessity to accept and tolerate the diversity of Syrian society was recognised explicitly by everybody – a decisive precondition to end the civil war.

On minorities, majorities and the problems with these concepts

Some participants from smaller confessional groups openly addressed their fear of radical Islamism which can undermine the cultural diversity of Syria such as Otared Haidar, a scholar teaching at Oxford University with roots in Salamiyah. She stressed the “disproportional contribution of Syrian minorities in the historical projects of enlightenment and modernity. Cultural particularity of all groups can only be preserved in a pluralistic society.”

Monzer Halloum, an activist professor from Latakia, warned, however, of the dangers of the very concept of minorities which from a certain point on might even further fortify sectarian divisions. He said, “Violence and sectarianism are not an option for us as a democratic movement,” arguing that they came by an escalation driven by the regime and some rebel groups. “We should beware of associating violence with sectarian groups as a whole and thus make false generalisations.” Also Nawal al Yaziji, a women’s activist from Damascus, as well as Tareq Aziziye, a scholar from Homs, insisted on rights associated with the concept of citizenship and not with confessional group affiliations.

Samir Abulaban, a member of the Political Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood, endorsed the rights of minorities referring to the Damascus Declaration of 2005, and signalled a readiness for the necessary dialogue. He even conceded that mistakes have been committed.

Originating from Homs, a highly mixed city, Samir Abulaban presented his own version of the parable of tolerance to the meeting: When the former Syrian prime minister Fares al Khoury, who happened to come from a Christian family, once appeared in public without a hat – at that time an appalling breach of customs – the Grand Mufti chose to put his own hat on the prime minister accepting to be the one seen without a headpiece.

The spin of the metaphor is somewhat changing fitting to his reciprocal question whether these minorities would in turn abide by the will of the majority. At this stage the discussion could not be continued and there is obviously a need to carry on and deepen these arguments.

Stop the violence by driving a democratic transition

The strong and overarching agreement was on the urgent need to stop the violence. Nidal al Debs even went so far to say there are now only two parties in Syria: “Either against the war or with the war.” Fateh Jamous, a long-term political prisoner from Latakia hailing from the Communist Action Party, and now one of the leaders of the Coalition for Peaceful Change, said that the party for peace was growing. But how to achieve peace once a general cultural mutual acceptance is reached? How to politically pave the way to a lasting ceasefire?

There was implicit consensus that meeting the original democratic demands of releasing political prisoners and now also hostages (from both sides), freedom for political articulation and organisation, and allowing humanitarian relief to be granted will facilitate stopping the violence – something that could be called democratic transition.

Abdulmanem Harah, a relief worker from rebel-held Aleppo, said that the constituencies of the insurgency would be ready to raise the white flag if the other side did so as well. “But it is up to the surgeon to end his operation.”

Aziziye called upon moderate Political Islam to make a strong statement against terrorism – a problematic term as it is being employed mutually by both sides, while also bearing in mind the misuse spearheaded by Washington. Ayman Kahef, the editor-in-chief of the influential business news website syriandays.com coming from Hama, put it more boldly: “How can we grant Isis and Nusra a ceasefire? How can you stop them from continuing?”

At this point Vangelis Pissias, a Greek professor and organiser of the Gaza flotilla, intervened on behalf of the Initiative. The general aim of the organisers was not to condition the Syrians beyond the general principles – yes to democracy, no to foreign intervention – but to provide a framework for Syrians to freely discuss among themselves, which does not, however, exclude dialogue and exchange with the international solidarity movement – another important aim of the event. “We believe that the forces ready for a political solution on both sides must be encouraged and strengthened” thus gradually isolating the hardliners. In this way a socio-political bloc can be constructed that is eventually capable of engineering a ceasefire, and to secure that it is holding by depriving the violent sectarian forces on both sides of their popular support base. The more that the underlying democratic demands can be achieved the better this political project can come into swing.

Refugee drama

As the number of Syrians abandoning their homes is rapidly approaching 10m or close to the half of the population and starvation is spreading, the humanitarian supply becomes pivotal. Many criticised the handling of even misuse of the refugee problem by both sides for their respective political ends – including their foreign donors.

Arif Dalila, the former Dean of the Faculty of Economics at Damascus University, commented that opening borders for Syrian taking refuge abroad would be no solution either as it drained the country of its human resources. Monzer Halloum insisted that the remaining safe areas inside the country must be preserved and extended. “Many people from Aleppo and Damascus fled to the coastal areas regardless of their confessional background”, Nawal al Yaziji highlighted, delivering evidence that there are also countertendencies against sectarianism.

The emerging idea was that the struggle to meet the immediate needs of the refugees must be turned into a lever for a ceasefire and a political solution, really allowing relief to reach the people.

National convention for peace

All of the participants expressed their strong conviction that this positive experience should be repeated on a much larger stage, best in Damascus. This was the proposal of many, including Habib Issa, a leader of the internal opposition recognised across very diverse milieus, who addressed the consultation by a letter as he was not allowed to leave the country. In fact, around half of the invitees who had already accepted could not participate either because they were denied exit, did not receive clearance or did not dare to come.

Arif Dalila, the longest serving political prisoner of the Damascene spring, also called for a national peace conference with the participation of all sides. Such a meeting preferably should take place inside the country but this requires strong guarantees from the government, Dalila said. “Civil society bears a great responsibility but as of now has no power as it has been silenced.” He mentioned Abdelaziz al Khayyer, a peaceful opposition leader, who was kidnapped in 2012 when he wanted to participate in a reconciliation conference, which happened to become the very last public meeting of the internal opposition. Dalila urged the international solidarity movement, the civil society and also the UN to provide an umbrella to these

efforts – contrary to the global and regional powers, which were considered by the participants as an integral part of the problem.

Unresolved issues

While the closed deliberations were marked by the described spirit of mutual understanding, differences came to the forefront when it came to going public over the following issues:

To which extent granting rights to the Kurdish people while preserving the unity of Syria? A far-reaching autonomy and decentralisation as put forward by Xaled Issa, the European spokesman of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), remained controversial.

Is it possible to secure equal rights to women and civil rights in general while not contradicting Sharia as Mohamad Alsayed, a Sheikh from rebel-held Aleppo demanded? What can be the meaning of a state that is “neither secular nor Islamic”?

As conveners of the consultation, we deliberately intended to position the consultation as complementary to negotiations or any other meeting involving top representatives. Therefore any result in terms of organisation should not put the legitimacy of either side into question – obviously a sensible matter.

While as organisers we are convinced that the political solution is the only viable one with regard to the interest of the vast majority of the Syrian people, the consensual formula emerging was “a political solution is the best solution”. We have to acknowledge that the warring sides both justify their military action (which in the end is only logical). The positive step is that they are seriously considering a political solution and are testing the ground for the conditions of a ceasefire. Most of the participants, however, regarded it as their duty to pressurise all sides, including the involved foreign powers, to accept and work for a political solution.

Similar holds for foreign interference, sanctions and intervention: Everybody claims to defend the sovereignty of the Syrian people and to keep foreign interests out. But while the third-partyists define this as an immediate and primordial demand and a pre-condition for a solution, the ones closer to the conflicting sides conceive that expelling foreign forces is only a possibility upon a ceasefire.

Network for peace

Everybody agreed to continue the efforts for a political solution by involving the whole spectrum of diversity on the level of civil society. It is, however, obvious that at a certain stage a solution can only become possible with direct representatives present. This step cannot be excluded, but must also be undertaken cautiously and gradually and might eventually shift to another, more appropriate forum.

One immediate result is that the participants, together with the Initiative, will constitute a network open to everybody supporting a political solution, whether Syrian or not. Furthermore a committee should be set up charged with preparing the next meeting.

The House of Peace (Beit al Salam), which is at the same time an abstract political concept as well as a concrete physical space, would be the most appropriate venue for a national convention for peace, as referred to above. The Beit al Salam is conceived of as a place inside the country, preferably in Damascus, where a ceasefire is already in place, where free political expression is allowed, and where security for all components of civil society is guaranteed.

The global peace movement is called upon to serve as a political umbrella for this process of building a political democratic solution alongside the United Nations.



Ayman Kahef addressing the press conference



Mohamad Alsayed, Nawal al Yaziji



Abdelrazak Alloush, Khaled Issa



Ali Watfe, Bassam Aouil, Nidal al Dibs

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