

Inner-Syrian attempt to bridge conflict: devolution

Multi-sided group proposes constitutional principles

From April 27-29, 2016, more than two dozens Syrians with diverse affiliations met in Austria's Peace Castle Schlaining. They intended to explore routes to a social contract which would need to accompany a ceasefire tackling the underlying conflicts of the civil war. The main conclusion: decentralization.

The “*All Syrian Consultation on the future Constitution of Syria*” took place under the auspices of the international “*Peace in Syria*” initiative. The latter was set up in the early stages of the conflict when the popular revolt was already showing substantive signs of turning into a civil war with an increasing sectarian momentum. It has been based on the principle of opposing foreign intervention and defending the right to self-determination. From the very inception we shared the view of many Syrians that militarization will drive sectarianism and vice versa. We wanted to lend a platform to all those searching for a political solution in the triangle of historically diverging interests the Assad regime proved to be unable to reconcile: The Sunni Islamic pole with its political aspirations. The Kurdish demands for national self-determination. The secular forces based on a bloc of all those components fearing Political Islam and often claiming the heritage of pan-Arabism.

Along the years “*Peace in Syria*” has been endeavouring several events ranging from “*all sides*” conventions, over a delegation to Syria to separate meetings with the warring sides respectively their civil society environment.

Centre of gravity of the recent conference was the discussion on elements of a constitution being acceptable to a vast majority of all or at least the main components of society. Though this time the more extreme poles from both sides stayed away, the event nevertheless covered a wide range: from Sunni sheikhs close to the Ulama, over Kurds from both sides of the political divide, leftists of different shades some continuing to stand for a reform of the regime from within, several confessional groups, to members of Itilaf (*Syrian National Coalition*). It is the first time that the emerging document has been signed by all participants representing a strong compromise.

The discussions revolved around the meaning of decentralisation and its possible application in reference to Kurdish right, to parliament and to the presidency. Beside the rights of equal citizenship regardless of any affiliation the concept of collective rights of identity groups (national, ethnic, confessional etc.) has been discussed. Women's rights including a quota found their way into the declaration while the relationship between religious and civil personal law was relegated to further deliberations.

The quintessence condensed by a foreign observer: devolving central power down to the multi-layered and overlapping components of society is the way to mend the broken fabric of society and reconstruct national unity. It is the precondition to a peace which is not only based on dividing the cake between the regional and global powers but there the Syrian people maintains a certain say and has at least some of the democratic and social demands realised.

All participants, first of all the Syrian as well as the international organising committee, are convinced that this initiative should continue to give its contribution to elaborate a social contract which eventually might be decided upon in the frame of a constituent assembly.

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