



THE **SHAIKH** GROUP

Intra-Syrian Dialogue
Zurich, February 19-20, 2019
Event Briefing

Introduction

The Shaikh Group (TSG), with the kind support of the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, held an Intra-Syrian Dialogue (ISD) on February 19-20, which focused on the relationship between the central government and different localities throughout Syria. This was the second meeting convened by TSG on decentralized governance, after an initial meeting held in October 2018. Participants represented different constituencies of Syrian society and included local governance actors from across the country, civil society actors, economists, and governance experts, as well as opposition and Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) representatives. Senior officials from Switzerland, the European External Action Service, the Russian Federation, and the United States attended the workshop as observers.

This marked the first ISD in which TSG adopted a new approach to convening these workshops, establishing partnerships with Syrian organizations or experts in the conception and preparation of the meetings. In a context where the space for Syrians to exchange ideas on post-armed conflict outcomes across various divides appears to be shrinking further, TSG will aim for these workshops to provide a platform both to bridge those divides, and to promote and discuss relevant research or initiatives led by Syrian civil society or expert organizations, involving these actors in shaping the discussion at the earliest stage. Outcomes from these dialogues—which will continue to be held under the Chatham House Rule—will also be shared more publicly than has been the case in the past.

Background

Syria today is in a de-facto state of fragmentation, with different models and experiences of local governance prevailing within distinct zones: the areas held by the government, the opposition and Turkish-backed actors in the northwest, and the SDC in the northeast. In previous dialogues, Syrian participants emphasized that any revisions to the relationship between the central government and local administrations, intending to restore and reform a united Syria, must be agreed through a negotiated political process—not imposed or adopted as a reflection of this current, de-facto division.

At the workshop in October 2018, participants considered different conceptions of decentralized governance, concluding with a set of guiding principles to be applied to any collective effort led by Syrians to redefine the shape of the post-conflict state. They agreed that the relationship between the central government and the different local administrations must be reconfigured to balance the myriad local and national interests.

However, Syrians continue to differ significantly regarding the desirable shape of a future state, the distribution of powers between the central government and the different localities, and ways to ensure equitable economic development throughout Syria. They also recognize the dim prospects for arriving at any such revised models through a negotiated political settlement in the near term. In that context, participants here debated approaches for both preventing a further hardening of the current divisions, and keeping open the potential pathways to a reunited Syrian state.

Meeting outcomes and recommendations

The following comprises the major themes and recommendations made by participants at the meeting.

Different visions of future governance

Discussing their respective visions for a revised, future model of governance, most participants agreed that a highly centralized government could no longer effectively manage and serve the interests of Syrians.

- A revised relationship between central and local authorities was seen as critical not only as a limit central authority, but also as an essential element in arriving at a model of governance based on equal citizenship, that more effectively recognizes and unifies the various components of Syrian society and promotes equitable development throughout the country.
- Participants argued for various degrees of decentralized governance. Many, including representatives of the opposition and actors associated with the Syrian Interim Government, called for a form of “administrative decentralization” based on the current governorate divisions of Syria—though in a more formalized and “expanded” system than the local council model existing today. Such a model would require nuanced policies applicable for each individual locality based on their distinct needs. Security forces involved in policing should be comprised of citizens from the area. Certain powers, including as related to national defense and foreign affairs would remain with the central government.
- SDC representatives promoted what they argued was as a similar vision, termed “democratic decentralization,” in which each region enjoys a greater level of autonomy, again based on geographic areas rather than any ethnic or sectarian blocs. Such a model, as under development in areas controlled by the SDC, they argued, would ensure that local actors are genuinely empowered to administer their areas and are made more effectively accountable to their constituents.

Pathways forward

Participants acknowledged the dim prospects for shaping and implementing such revised models of governance through a negotiated political settlement in the near term, which many continued to see as the only pathway through which a significantly reformed system

may be adopted. Syria today remains divided into three distinct zones, which most participants viewed as likely to remain, at least in some form, for the foreseeable future. They discussed a range of approaches for positively shaping future models of governance—both within and among these zones—and promoting their visions for reform, even in a context where a national-level political process remains stalled.

- Actors involved in local governance in each of these zones acknowledged the various shortcomings of existing structures in their areas, in terms genuine representation and responsiveness to citizens' needs. As one participant said, even areas outside regime control do not currently represent “alternative democratic spaces, or models of governance,” pointing the lack of transparent and participatory institutions in each of these zones. A senior SDC official explained that his organization’s governing project “continues to consult with local communities to find ways to improve local governance.” Several participants called for further investment into developing and improving the models that exist in areas outside of government control in Syria’s northwest and northeast. Some, though, feared that further strengthening these entities will only entrench existing divisions and lead to a further fragmentation of the state.
- There were strong calls for increased engagement between elements of opposition in north Aleppo province (and, where possible, Idlib) and the SDC in northeast Syria. Sharing experiences in local governance could provide lessons for reforms to existing structures. Gradual reconciliation between these actors, SDC representatives argued, would help with conflict prevention within both areas, and improve their respective negotiating positions vis-à-vis the regime. While differences still exist between those who support the SDC project and its critics, both agreed that any future governance model should restore equal citizenship to all Syrians and promote democratic governing principles. Such areas of agreement, it was argued, could form the basis for future dialogue, and potentially expand to coordinated efforts on matters pertaining to governance, security, and economic development.
- Law 107 was seen by many as viable legal framework for advocating steps toward a future model of decentralized administration in all areas. They stressed, though, that the lack of any meaningful application of its provisions by the central government meant that it had so far effectively served as cover for a “re-centralization” of regime authority. Amendments to the law would be needed in future, whereby, for instance, governors are still appointed by the center but must be from that particular locality.

Cultivating equitable economic development

In the final session, participants discussed the importance of guaranteeing equitable economic development among Syria’s regions; not only to rebuild the areas devastated by the war, but to help facilitate a balanced relationship between each locality and the central government.

- A lack of development in certain rural areas was among the primary drivers of the uprising of 2011. Participants emphasized the importance of addressing this

problem—including through equitable distribution of natural resources—in order to ensure the sustainability of any political settlement to the conflict. Each region of Syria demonstrates a comparative advantage in the production of certain goods, highlighting the need not just to revive localized production of commodities, but to facilitate and expand trade throughout Syria based on demand, participants argued. Without significant reform, improved capacity and any genuine accountability at the center, however, it will be difficult to see such economic policies adopted.

- In the short term, participants called on international stakeholders to support capacity-building measures for local councils outside government control to improve their ability to execute administrative and fiscal responsibilities. In regime held areas, the central government, responding to needs identified at the local level, should encourage economic development projects that could reinvigorate the private sector.
- In the longer term—and should a renewed political process proceed—capacity-building assistance and partnerships would also be required at the central government level to help manage the national development policy and coordinate effectively among the different localities.

Conclusions

The relationship between the central government and different localities inside Syria—both inside and beyond regime control—has been reshaped in different ways over the course of the conflict, both through design and default. A growing number of voices in TSG’s dialogues argue that a formally and meaningfully decentralized model of governance will be needed in future. Some participants who had in the past fervently supported maintaining or restoring highly centralized system, here recognised the likelihood of long-term divisions and argued for further developing and strengthening existing local governance structures outside of government control. While all participants argue that these steps should form part of efforts move toward a decentralised system within a territorially united Syria, fears remain that this may harden the existing divisions—if not risk making them permanent.

In this context, many argued for the importance of increased engagement between administrations in the opposition held northwest and SDC-held northeast; continued capacity-building and other technical support in both zones; and increased economic exchange among all regions of Syria. They equally call for increased humanitarian and stabilization assistance to all areas devastated by the conflict, regardless who administers the territory. While a UN-led, inclusive political process remains out of reach, and in the absence of a political settlement, enhancing the performance and capacity of local councils will be needed to continue to provide relief in the short term.