In his briefing at the UN Security Council, the organization’s Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, proposed taking advantage of the relative halt in military hostilities in the country to bring together the main regional and international parties concerned. According to the official, this should be done for the sake of preliminary negotiations on confidence-building measures and to pave the way for a political settlement to the crisis that has continued to tear apart the unfortunate country since 2011. But the general view held by many specialists is that Pedersen’s proposal is unlikely to yield the desired results, and a more effective alternative would be to encourage the interested parties to agree on a single issue to start with before gradually addressing the rest.

Indeed, the conflict in Syria was actually composed of a number of conflicts on different fronts from the very start: between the regime and the armed opposition, between coalition forces led by the USA and the radical terrorist group ISIS (banned in Russia), between Turkey and the Kurds, and between Israel and Iranian volunteers who came to the aid of the Syrian people at a time of need. Tel Aviv is actively pouring fuel on the flames by regularly carrying out aggressive air strikes on the Syrian territory, exploiting Damascus’s weakness during these trying times.

With the interference of different regional and international powers, Syria has fallen into disarray and become a web of numerous conflicting agendas and interests. Today, ten years after the start of the conflict, the regime has restored control over almost 70% of the country. The rest is divided between Turkey, the Kurds, the USA, the armed opposition, and various terrorist groups.

Aside from insignificant skirmishes in the south-west and north-west of Syria, relative peace reigns on various fronts for now. This has largely been the case since, on Russia’s initiative, Turkey signed the Idlib agreement in March
2020, which led to a ceasefire. In some analyses and reports it is argued that the current peace is a result of the consensus among key parties after they reached the conclusion that they had achieved as many of their aims as they could. The authorities in Damascus were also satisfied by the size of territory under their control, after consideration of the economic and military costs associated with the efforts to retake more from the militant opposition. Moreover, Russia and Iran were pleased with their successes in ensuring survival of the regime led by Syria’s lawfully elected president, Bashar Assad, and the expansion of their influence in the region. Turkey was wary that new hostilities in northern Syria would lead to a new wave of refugees in Anatolia, which is already home to over four million Syrian refugees. Ankara also found an acceptable formula for dealing with the perceived threat of the People’s Defense Units (YPG) near its southern border. Israel, by the look of things, was also very pleased with its own aggressive air strikes against Syrian regions where it believes Iranian military instructors are stationed and from which mythical Iranian strikes could be carried out against Israel.

However, although the majority of strategic research centers predict that this relative peace will remain for the foreseeable future, independent experts continue to caution against relying on a so-called consensus that is provisional and fragile. After all, the Syrian crisis is highly complicated and is bound up with many other problems in the Middle East. There is always something dangerous that can provoke an escalation in military-political tensions and spiral out of control. This is the main reason that various sides have taken advantage of the current peace to suggest ideas for overcoming the divide between regional and international powers and to encourage them to adopt a conciliatory policy with a view to bringing an end to the suffering of the Syrian people.

It is well known that the UN envoy’s main mandate is to promote a political settlement of the crisis in the country “under the leadership of Syria,” in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and the Geneva Communiqué. The resolution calls for a credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian system of government, a timetable and process for drafting a new constitution, and free and fair elections in accordance with the provisions in the constitution. These elections will be supervised by the United Nations, and all Syrians, at home or abroad, will be able to vote. It is obvious why they will be controlled by the UN, whose management operates in the United States and is now wholly subject to Washington’s strong influence.

However, the UN has been unable to make any progress in achieving these goals. Syria's 150-member constituent assembly, representing the government, opposition, and civil society, has made no progress with drafting a new constitution for the country in its five meetings to date. The UN envoy has tried to persuade the members of the Assembly to convene for a sixth session, but the majority of observers don’t anticipate that it will bring any success due to recriminations between various Syrian camps and the divergence of views between Russia, China, Iran, and Western countries, which are trying to impose their selfish point of view in spite of reality.

Effectively, the conflicting opinions and interests of the main regional and international powers in Syria, and no doubt the self-serving interests of the West that seem more like colonial ones, are the main obstacle to the UN’s efforts to carry out its mandate. This is what inspired Pedersen’s recent proposal, made at a briefing to the Security Council on August 24, to invite “key states to cooperate in preliminary discussions on a package of concrete and reciprocal steps that are realistically and precisely defined, that are implemented in parallel, and that are verifiable.” Pedersen emphasized that “such steps are necessary, above all, in order to help save the lives of Syrians, to alleviate suffering, and to promote regional stability and the further implementation of resolution 2254.” According to those who sincerely seek to help the people of Syria, this resolution specifically aims for a comprehensive and lasting political settlement of the Syrian crisis.

Although in theory the UN envoy’s proposal is justified and consistent with the principles and procedures of gradual confidence-building measures in conflict resolution, its application in the case of Syria is unlikely to yield any results. The main reason for this is that the contentious issues between the main states involved in the Syrian conflict are not the sort that can be resolved through confidence-building measures. For example, they do not have a common vision for the future of Idlib, or even whether the Syrian authorities have the right to assert their sovereignty over it and fight the terrorist groups that currently control it. They cannot agree on the future of the militant groups that have been moved to Idlib as a refuge under various de-escalation agreements. One of these groups is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (banned in Russia), a former branch of Al-Qaeda (banned in Russia), which the UN Security Council, the United States, Russia and Turkey have declared a terrorist organization for its criminal activities. However, there are reports that some politicians are now calling for the USA to revise this definition, which would supposedly allow, under certain conditions, for the assimilation of this terrorist organization into political process, thereby legalizing its members.

Proponents of this idea claim that the organization has ostensibly made certain ideological changes to distance itself
from jihadist fundamentalism, that withdrawing the terrorist classification will facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the population of Idlib province, and that it will help to pave the way for negotiations on the future of its capital. Needless to say, this proposal, if implemented, will exacerbate already significant tensions over how to proceed in the area. Turkey, fearing a further influx of refugees, would categorically oppose any attempt by the Syrian authorities to regain control over Idlib by military means, even if it agreed with the declassification.

Other important and related examples of why the UN envoy’s proposal will not work include the future of the YPG and the status of the Kurds in northern Syria, the future of the Turkish military presence in northern Syria, the role of the USA in Syria, the impact of the Iranian military presence on Israel, the effectiveness of economic sanctions on Syria, the future of Assad’s government, and the issue of deals to rebuild the country. All of these questions, and many other things, are highly controversial. In response to them, differences do not only exist between countries that are either in favor or against the current authorities. For example, the USA, Syria, Iran, and Turkey differ sharply on the matter of rights to natural resources and other economic areas, their respective roles in relation to the Syrian government and their spheres of influence in the country. Not least around Syria’s southwestern borders, where the presence of Iranian instructors could cause problems with Israel. Furthermore, drawing attention to itself is the US military’s overt plunder of oil from Syrian oil producers, depriving the already disadvantaged Syrians of the last of their money. The wealthy USA is robbing poor Syria! There’s a worthy topic for a UN resolution: condemnation of Washington’s vile policy towards not only Syria but other countries that have also found themselves in poverty through the fault of the West.

In view of the abundance of issues, and the complex structure and depth of disagreements on them, it is highly unlikely that regional and international powers will be able to reach a consensus on confidence-building measures that are acceptable to all parties. It would be a waste of the relative peace that now exists in the country to participate in preliminary negotiations, which, in all likelihood, will go nowhere. Some analysts believe that direct negotiations between Russia and the United States, which will result in a comprehensive agreement on various issues, are the only way to put an end to the conflict in Syria. However, it is difficult to imagine, especially as there are no precedents that validate such a possibility. And while Russia strives towards a peaceful and prompt solution to the protracted Syrian crisis, a continuation of the plunder of national wealth, including of historical treasures that are now fairly prevalent on America’s shadow market, suits Washington just fine.

A more realistic approach would be to invite the key parties and, most importantly, the two superpowers, to initiate negotiations on one issue, such as the issue of Idlib and the fate of terrorist groups there. If they could reach a consensus on this issue, it would open the door for a range of further decisions on other issues. Certainly, an international consensus on Idlib would prevent many complications. It would address the numerous consequences of any use of military force to capture Idlib under the pretext of fighting terrorism. It would also encourage the Syrian authorities to take positive steps towards a political solution and help resolve other issues such as economic sanctions and obstacles to the country’s reconstruction.

However, it is the West that is increasingly turning the screw on the Syrian people, extending economic and other sanctions against Damascus in every possible way. It is clear that until progress is made in Idlib, the most that can be hoped for is a prolongation of the relative peace in order for as much humanitarian aid as possible to be delivered to the suffering Syrian people.

Still, the upcoming negotiations on drafting the Syrian constitution, which will resume in Geneva on October 18, are inspiring particular optimism. This was voiced by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, following consultations in Moscow with Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov.

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