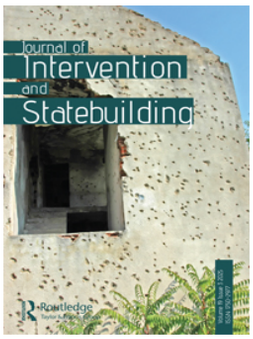

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Power Peace: The Resolution of the Syrian Conflict in a Post-Liberal Era of Peacemaking

Juline Beaujouan

ABSTRACT

The complexity of the Syrian conflict prompted the engagement of new actors of peacemaking – notably Turkey and Russia – whose interactions with the UN model have often been described as the confrontation of liberal versus illiberal norms and values. This article investigates the impact of these dynamics on peace and the political system in Syria. Building on the analysis of 100 interviews, it questions the liberal-illiberal dyad. Peacemaking in Syria is more hybrid. It is a marketplace where mediators of all types pursue 'power peace', or the pre-eminence of geopolitical interests and statecraft over any ideal of peace.

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Introduction

> Does it really matter who imposes peace – the West or someone else – if this peace is assorted by exclusive governance arrangements and lack of Syrian agency? We are the losers of all these types of peace anyways.[1]

Since the end of the Cold War, the wider Middle East has witnessed the emergence of increasingly complex intra-state conflicts, featuring self-reinforcing dynamics of internationalisation and localisation (Ehteshami, Rasheed, and Beaujouan 2020; Palik, Obermeier, and Rustad 2022). Conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria are good examples of such evolution. They prompted the involvement of external – mostly state – actors, who intervened directly on the ground or acted more discretely, financing local armed groups. These conflicts also displayed a high degree of local specificity and the multiplication of local actors who sometimes chose to act as proxies to gain military capability and/or political traction. This fragmentation, highlighted by the recent space turn in peace and conflict studies (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2022) is not confined to violence. It is often mirrored in peace processes when multilateral attempts to find a national solution are stalled for years. In these cases, parallel peace processes emerge, some of them in the form of local initiatives that use peace practices distinctive of the Track I mediation. These local peace processes aim to solve local grievances, but they may also be used by international mediators as a bottom-up approach to the national conflict (Bell et al. 2021; Bell and Wise 2022). It follows that

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peace in the wider Middle East is not linear but a multidimensional process that happens, sometimes simultaneously, at various levels and across different spaces.

Little research, however, tried to uncover the relationality and brokerage between these different levels of peace, especially in situations of juxtaposing peace processes. This situation is precisely what inspired this study on Syria, whose 13-year-long conflict epitomises the complexity of multi-actor arenas of conflict transformation and peacemaking. The country witnessed the emergence of two parallel international peace processes: the Geneva Process, led by the UN, and the Astana Process, initiated by three self-proclaimed guarantors of peace, namely Iran, Russia, and Turkey. These peace processes are not limited to the international sphere; they are partly fed by more secluded negotiations at the local level. Often interpreted as the replacement of liberal peace by illiberal or authoritarian peace (Abboud 2021; Costantini and Hanau Santini 2022; Lewis 2022), the involvement of the three guarantor states in the resolution of the Syrian conflict might reveal more complex, nuanced, dynamics.

External mediation in Syria reflects a broader trend. The wider Middle East has a long history of third-party mediation, not only because it has been a fertile soil for conflicts but also because the idea of deferring to a neutral mediator is well anchored in tribal and Islamic traditions (Irani and Funk 1998). The major conflicts that have punctuated the relations of Middle Eastern states in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have triggered the involvement of external mediators. An exploration[2] of the PA-X peace agreements database (Bell et al. 2024) shows that close to 45% of the 132 written national peace agreements signed between 1990 and 2023 in the wider Middle East were mediated by states or intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). This ratio is in line with the global trend; about half of PA-X's 2,055 written peace agreements were mediated by similar actors. As for the 147 local peace agreements signed over the same period, third-party mediation by states or IGOs dropped down to 10.9%. These actors seem particularly disengaged from local peacemaking in the wider Middle East compared to the rest of the world (20.7% of 349 local agreements).

In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, several conflicts – some still active today – erupted and prompted the engagement of new actors of peacemaking. During that time, the internal divisions of regional organisations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation constrained their ability to play an effective role in peacemaking and enacted the primacy of bilateralism as a mode of engagement in conflict resolution. For instance, Turkey increased its diplomatic engagement according to the Justice and Development Party's policy aimed at promoting civilisational dialogue and mediation in the region (Sofos 2022). Reversely, Russia had initiated its return to the diplomatic stage after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and played a supporting role, along with traditional mediators, in peace processes. This was exemplified by Russia's participation in the Middle East Peace Process together with the US, Norway, Egypt, and Jordan at the turn of the twenty-first century. Its involvement in Syria is yet particular. Not only does Russia play a central role in conflict transformation, but Syria is its 'first major military intervention outside its own neighbourhood since Soviet times' (Lewis 2022, 662).

Inspired by the complexity of conflict transformation and peace in the wider Middle East, this article explores the fragmentation of peacemaking in the Syrian conflict,

notably how the UN model interacts with the intervention of supposedly illiberal peace guarantors. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how modern conflicts increasingly operate as conflict systems but also to a critical view of the localisation of peacemaking and the decreasing engagement of Western countries and the UN from the mediation space. The article also holds practical relevance for mediators trying to bring multiple parties to the negotiation table, and for the humanitarian and development communities trying to grasp the complexity of fragmented conflicts in the aim to design and implement constructive projects. The article proceeds in four main sections that follow a brief exploration of the theoretical and methodological approaches that guided this study. After providing an overview of the dynamics that led to the juxtapositions of two peace processes in Syria, the article highlights how the practices of the guarantor states within the Astana peace track fostered the emergence of 'power peace', or the pre-eminence of pragmatism and geopolitical interests over any ideals of peace. The article then moves on to shedding light on the relationality between the two peace processes, and what post-liberal peacemaking looks like in Syria. Finally, it concludes by discussing the consequences of power peace on governance, notably the tenacity of the state as a political form, or the fragment of reference in post-conflict settings.

Literature review

The fragmentation of peace in Syria can be interpreted in the light of a changing world order and fading liberal peace paradigm. In the early 1990s, liberal peace became the dominant form of conflict transformation and peacemaking, which saw the accrued engagement of Western democratic states and supranational institutions in the global south (Mac Ginty 2010; Paris 2010). Liberal peace flourished in a global environment that shifted from a bipolar to a unipolar world order under US hegemony. In this context, the UN assumed a dominant position over all spaces of conflict transformation and peacemaking. Its efforts were 'geared towards the creation of liberal democratic states as the form of governance that protects human and minority rights, sustains economic growth and guarantees freedom' (Costantini and Hanau Santini 2022, 33), with little success, however, in promoting local ownership and accounting for autochthon aspirations (Esser 2013; Höglund and Fjelde 2011). However, the ever-changing world order is now squeezing the space for hegemonic views and the liberal peacebuilding consensus (Morjé Howard and Stark 2018). Multipolarity is becoming the norm and is reflected at the very core of the UN where the Security Council (UNSC) is facing a growing stalemate and the ever-more assertive position of some of its permanent members, notably Russia and China. This, coupled with the changing nature of conflicts outlined in introduction, means that the UN gradually lost its capacity to lead conflict resolution efforts (Hampson 2004). Faced with this global reconfiguration, even the critiques of liberal peace struggled to offer clear conceptual alternatives to the fading liberal consensus (Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009; Paris 2010; Richmond 2015). For a growing number of scholars, the only genuine substitute to liberal peace is inherently illiberal, as suggested by the emerging authoritarian conflict management and illiberal peace literature (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018; Piccolino 2015; Smith Claire 2014).[3]

Surely, new actors in conflict transformation and peacebuilding break from the impartial, 'pure mediator' tradition in the sense that they have critical resources and interests in

conflicts and their resolution (Costantini and Hanau Santini 2022). Moreover, some of them are medium to large strong states – like China, Russia or Turkey – again breaking from the pattern of traditional mediators being represented by international and regional organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), individuals and small states (Svensson 2007, 232). Finally, as will be developed further in this article, they impose a distinctive style of conflict resolution where peace practices, especially at the local level, are used as tactical tools of conflict management. In that sense, while liberal peace promotes an ideal of long-term conflict termination, non-traditional mediators implement the post-interventionist turn that fosters short-term conflict stabilisation and endurance of authoritarian regimes (Chandler 2012). This last distinction, however, should be nuanced by recent claims that UN peace operations are also taking a pragmatic turn 'away from ambitious, liberal, attempts at 'fixing failed states' towards arguably more realistic or [contextualized] approaches to addressing intrastate conflicts' (Andersen 2018; see also Debiel, Held, and Schneckener 2016; Rosas Duarte and Souza 2024; Wiuff Moe and Steputtat 2018). Notwithstanding important divergences, non-traditional mediators do not completely break from the liberal framework. Chiefly, they partly operate within UN institutions, norms and instruments. As such, 'post-liberal peacemaking' (Richmond 2012) cannot simply be considered the mere contestation of liberal norms. Post-liberal peacemaking is more hybrid and can be described as a 'peace marketplace' where norms and practices of peacemaking are increasingly diversified and offer mediators, conflict-affected communities and warring parties a range of options to resolve conflicts.

This article addresses concerns that the shift from liberal to illiberal peacebuilding has not been sufficiently reflected in conflict management practices (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018). Beyond this, it also questions the liberal-illiberal dyad and supports the idea that, in the current world, mediators of all types selectively use liberal and illiberal ideas and practices to pursue 'power peace'. As such, this study contributes to a better understanding of post-liberal peace and its impact on political systems.

Methodology

This study builds on the analysis of 100 semi-structured interviews conducted in and around Syria, with the aim to shed light on the strategies and opportunities for several peace actors to navigate the political unsettlement and fragmentation of the peace process in Syria. Interviews were informed by three guiding questions: i/ What are the peace practices of the UN and the guarantor states in Syria; ii/ What is the relationality between the juxtaposing peace processes; iii/ What is the impact of these peace practices on political systems in Syria? They were conducted in three Syrian governorates where guarantor states have a strong presence and influence on the ground, notably Idlib and opposition-held Aleppo in the northwest and Daraa in the south. The selection of areas under the control of several governmental bodies – the Syrian government and two de-facto opposition governments – also provided the opportunity to include diverse political views. A total of 50 interviews were conducted by Syrian team members inside Syria between September 2022 and March 2023. Moreover, 34 interviews were conducted by the author in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey between September and December 2022. Semi-structured interviews favoured discussion, promoted participants'

ownership of the addressed themes, and contributed to reducing the stress associated with discussing personal and sensitive topics such as the Syrian conflict.

The main analysis was complemented by a glimpse into the perceptions of grassroots on the Geneva and Astana peace processes. These perceptions were collected via four focus group discussions (FGD) (for a total of 28 participants), including two groups exclusively composed of female participants to compensate for the underrepresentation of women in the various stages of the Syrian peace processes. FGD reduced the formality of interviews and allowed participants to engage in a conversation. While not representative of the whole Syrian population, the author found it essential to include some of the voices that are quasi-systematically excluded from peacemaking practices but are the first impacted by these practices.

Inside and outside Syria, initial participants were recruited through the personal and professional networks of the researchers. These networks were developed over a decade of work in the field of peace and conflict in the Middle Eastern region. The initial pool of participants was then used to nominate more participants who met the eligibility criteria for the study. In Iraq, Jordan, and Syria, where tribal and personal relations remain at the centre of social networks, the snowball sampling method facilitated the recruitment of more individuals and fostered a relationship of trust between the researchers and the participants. The researchers targeted key stakeholders with first-hand experience of interactions with at least one of the three guarantor states. It included members of the constitutional committee, political and military advisers with armed groups and governments, local civil society, activists, tribal elders, and representatives of local governance institutions. The number of persons interviewed for this study, a hundred, allowed the author to verify and triangulate the information provided in this article. Issues of positionality and potential biases were mitigated by constant discussions with Syrian team members and by the author's decade-long experience in Syria and the Middle East region.

The data emerging from the interviews and FGD were analysed through an inductive, thematic content analysis. This method was found to be the most adequate to identify common themes in an organic manner, with a focus on comparing and triangulating data within each system of governance surveyed. Hence, while this article features a number of anecdotes, the Syrian views included in the following sections reflect opinions that were voiced by several participants, rather than isolated opinions.

The fragmentation of the Syrian peace process(es)

The Syrian conflict emerged in 2011 when peaceful protests inspired by the revolutionary wave that called for reforms across the MENA were quickly weaponised by the Syrian regime and hijacked by a number of state and non-state actors. In just a few months, Syria sunk before the eyes of the world into an uncontrollable and dangerous situation for the whole region. This prompted a growing number of Syrians to call for the overthrow of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and several political powers to moderate a series of peace initiatives in the view to find an exit to the crisis (Lundgren 2016).

After a failed mediation mission headed by the Arab League, the Syrian file was passed to the UN in January 2012. However, negotiations that initially proceeded within the walls of the Security Council quickly failed when the draft resolution proposed by Western states in favour of regime change – namely the United States (US), the United Kingdom

(UK), and France – was rejected by the vetoes of Russia and China. A counterproposal was made by Russia to bring warring parties to the negotiation table. But the plan was rebuffed by the West who saw the fall of al-Assad as inevitable. This apparently convinced Moscow to initiate its own peace talks, in parallel with UN efforts. In the meantime, the UN redoubled efforts, appointing Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the UN and co-recipient of the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize, as the UN mediator in Syria to resolve the impasse.[4] Yet, none of the initiatives launched by the UN and member states succeeded in providing fast solutions to the 'entrapment' of the Syrian conflict (Vuković and Bernabei 2019). In March 2013, Muadh al-Khatib, the head of the official Syrian opposition, the Syrian National Coalition, resigned after he allegedly failed to garner support over negotiations with the regime and to convince the international community to establish no-fly zones over Syria. The Geneva peace talks did not only discredit the opposition. A Syrian observer of the peace talks recorded:

> Walid al-Muhalim, who was representing the Syrian regime, exceeded the allocated time for his speech. Instead of seven minutes, he spoke for close to 40 minutes despite his promise to the UN Secretary-General that he would wrap up soon and that "Syria always keeps its promises". But he was also very insulting towards the Syrian opposition and Western countries and Mr. Ban himself. This convinced many that the regime could not be trusted. If its representative cannot even respect speech time, how can the regime ever respect a political agreement?[5]

It is not until 2015 that UN-led diplomacy started to pay off, giving many Syrians hope that their ordeal was close to an end: 'During the first years of the war, we had much faith in Western diplomacy … We believed that there was a desire to force the Syrian regime to transfer power. We believed that the international community wanted what we wanted'.[6]

UNSC Resolution 2254 was a diplomatic victory. Unanimously adopted on 18 December 2015, it called for a general ceasefire and a political settlement in Syria and suggested a roadmap for the political transition. Importantly, the resolution stated that '[t]he Syrian people will decide the future of Syria' (UNSC 2015). At that time, the Syrian regime had lost control of about 60% of the national territory and was forced to negotiate directly with opposition groups through local and international mediators. These negotiations typically resulted in localised, temporary, and renewable *hudna* or truce agreements.[7]

When Russia entered the conflict, in late 2015, it changed the fate of the peace process. On the military front, the intervention brought a strategic shift in favour of the Syrian regime that began to recapture key territories lost since 2011. On the diplomatic front, the inability of UN mediation to achieve tangible results and implement resolutions, and the progressive withdrawal of Western states from the Syrian file, gave room to the emergence of a different type of peace initiatives. The negotiation process to end the military siege over several cities is a telling example of Western diplomatic disengagement from Syria. According to Duncombe and Dunne's, the failure of the international community to intervene in the humanitarian emergency signified the fragility of the liberal world order (2018). In the words of a former Syrian staff of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 'At that time, it happened that no one was willing to lead the negotiations with Russia. The UN only tried to secure a safe road for the evacuation of the people'.[8]

Similar accounts were shared by representatives of the civil society in Rif Damascus, Marat al-Numan, and Daraa: 'We tried hard to reach out to the UN and special envoy De Mistura to negotiate with the Russians. We even created a WhatsApp group that brought together anyone with experience in dealing with the UN. The truth is that Russia did not allow anyone to negotiate. They achieved military objectives through a scorched earth policy and left us with two options: either you leave, or you are killed. We did not even manage to negotiate to stop the shelling'.[9] According to these civilians, negotiation practices during the sieges showed the lack of commitment of Russia to solve the conflict in partnership with the UN and within the framework of the existing Geneva peace process: 'I remember when we finally managed to negotiate a ceasefire in Douma in 2018. On the day the UN convoy entered the city to deliver humanitarian assistance, Russian jets started sheeling'.[10] They concluded, bitterly: 'Resolving the Syrian conflict is a matter of priorities and ability. Had the US wanted to negotiate with Russians at that time, they would have had cards to do so meaningfully, on equal terms, given their involvement in other fields such as Libya. The US had the ability the UN lacked. But Syria was already not a priority anymore'.[11]

In December 2016, the Astana talks were officially launched and led to an agreement between Iran, Russia, and Turkey to form a joint monitoring body to enforce a nationwide ceasefire, under the guidance of UNSC Resolution 2254. During these talks, a UN delegation acted as general observer and intermediary between representatives of the Syrian regime and the opposition. As such, if the Astana Process was launched outside the UN, it clearly fit into the UN framework as the system of reference for mediation. In fact, the tripartite initiative was welcomed by the West. This acquiescement was interpreted as 'a silent incapacity to propose an alternative' to end the conflict (Akpınar 2016, 9) or the sign of a pragmatic turn towards a more realistic resolution of the conflict through stability over regime change (Cengiz 2020). According to Hellmüller (2022, 546), this diplomatic shift toward 'non-Western' mediation reflected the multipolarity of the world order that manifested in a resurgence of geopolitical competition and resulted in little support for mediation from 'within' the UN.

More than a shift towards non-Western mediators, the emergence of Astana crystallised a relocation of power in the hands of states who possess military influence on the Syrian ground, or the political ability to impose peace on the key warring parties to the conflict. Departing from UN norms and instruments, therefore, seemed inexorable:

> Geneva is a huge power without tools to enforce and implement its decisions. I compare it to a Plato philosophy book full of nice principles: it looks great in principles, but it is theoretical. Astana is the opposite; it is very practical and has the means to implement what it calls peace on the ground. It is the ugly truth. The Syrian peace process is the story of a Trojan horse. The package looks like a gift but contains an army of enemies ready to fight us.[12]

For a few months, despite differences over the inclusion of certain warring parties, the two peace processes coexisted smoothly. Between January and May 2017, no less than four rounds of talks took place between Geneva and Astana and were coordinated to allow optimal participation in both platforms. Yet, by mid-2017, the Geneva talks ceased completely, and the Astana guarantors became more assertive in the imposition of a distinctive idea of peace based on the strengthening of al-Assad regime to the detriment of future power-sharing agreements (Costantini and Hanau Santini 2022). Even then, the

two processes continued to exist relationally, and the Astana track never completely broke from the Geneva framework. For instance, in January 2018, the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in the Russian city of Sochi resulted in the establishment of a Constitutional Committee tasked with drafting a new Syrian constitution. The Committee was placed under the auspices of the UN.

The emergence of power peace in Syria

The UN disengagement from the Syrian peace process gave the guarantor states the opportunity to implement a new approach to conflict transformation and peacemaking. They used peacemaking to advance their own geopolitical interests (Sökmen, Martínez, and de Pedro 2018). In addition to gaining control over natural resources (oil and gas) and the Mediterranean port of Tartous, Russia gained a prominent position to bargain with the US in other countries such as Ukraine and Libya. Iran gained much proximity to Israel, Jordan, and the Arab Gulf, by deploying militias loyal to the Islamic Republic in southern Syria. Through its presence and control over illegal trade, mostly drugs and weapons, Iran created an immediate security threat to its enemies and consolidated its bridge with the Lebanese Hezbollah. Finally, Turkey gained bargaining power against European countries by instrumentalising the refugee issue. Its military presence on the ground as the guarantor of peace in opposition-held areas also helped Ankara deter potential attacks by the Islamic State and Kurdish armed groups.

Recent scholarship highlighted the general principles of the Astana approach: a pragmatic partnership with actors who have influence on the ground, short-term stabilisation implemented through the combined use of violence and asymmetric negotiation, and the interlocking of national peace talks and regional diplomacy (Abboud 2021; Cengiz 2020; Lewis 2022). The *entente* between Iran, Russia, and Turkey – three powers with competing interests and loyalties in Syria and the wider Middle East – also exhibited a new form of pragmatic multilateralism where each mediator skilfully '[compartmentalizes] its foreign policy by concentrating on areas of cooperation to mitigate tensions elsewhere in the relationship' (Grajewski 2021, 6). This logic can be observed in the relationship between Russia and Iran. Despite tensions over military cooperation and economic reconstruction, the two guarantors coordinated several offensives and sanction evasions (Ibid). This logic is not only exhibited by the guarantor states. Recently, Middle East states witnessed a thaw in relations with Syria. Syria's Arab neighbours, who largely fuelled the conflict through the financing of non-state armed groups, have shown signs of rapprochement and started to normalise their relations with al-Assad, under the push of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Even Turkey, who sided with the Syrian opposition since the beginning of the conflict, might be on the verge of a diplomatic turn. In December 2022, Moscow held the first high-level meeting between Syrian and Turkish ministers since the beginning of the conflict (Beaujouan 2023c).

What is less evident in the existing academic discourse is that the guarantor states used the fragmentation of the Syrian conflict to engineer a multi-level negotiation process, weaving their way into every corner of the peace space in Syria. At the national level, the guarantors infiltrated intra-Syrian talks within the Constitutional Committee, which was established to foster a process inclusive of Syrian voices and work in line with the

Geneva call for a political transition. In addition to the strong role of Russia and Turkey in the selection of Committee members[13], a representative of the civil society in the Committee narrated:

> When the Committee was established, Russia, Turkey and Iran all submitted drafts of the new constitution. Russia suggested a federal government with the 14 existing governorates, Iran wanted a strict central government, while Turkey wanted to expand decentralisation. We rejected the three proposals and insisted that we wanted to create a new draft. For once, we were in agreement with al-Assad. The Russian plan, especially, was considered a strong blow to his power and legitimacy. But I believe that al-Assad would not have necessarily opposed the Russian plan if he could have stayed safe and, at least partly, in power in Damascus.[14]

At the local level, the guarantor states acted in their capacity of monitoring bodies to further implement the nationwide ceasefire negotiated in December 2016. This monitoring however, completely departed from the Geneva peace framework and eluded the UN accountability standards for human rights violations. A telling example is Turkey's three-military offensives in northern Syria that resulted in the securitisation of the border strip and a demographic re-engineering to remove the Kurdish presence that Ankara considers a national threat. Elsewhere, Russia mediated several peace deals between 2017 and 2021, like in Homs, Damascus, Quneitra and Daraa.[15] These so-called reconciliation agreements allegedly remedied violence and returned these areas under the control of the Syrian regime with the supervision of Russia and its proxies. But they were also the outcome of aggressive military campaigns aimed at exhausting opposition armed groups and local populations and forcing them to accept Russia's terms and conditions for peace. Instead of being the result of genuine and inclusive negotiations, at least some reconciliation agreements were template agreements submitted by Russian officials and annotated by hand by local opposition armed groups.[16] In the words of a high-ranked officer who took part in several local negotiations in south Syria, 'When a Russian [military man] is in the room, nobody dares to open his mouth. The Russians are in control of everything in the regime-held areas and everyone listens to them'.[17]

By navigating the local, national, and international levels of peacemaking, the Astana guarantors managed to be omnipresent and flexible in their means of engagement and interactions with a range of actors. These adaptive peace practices gave them a real comparative advantage against the rigid normative framework of the UN. Interestingly, the fragmentation of the Syrian conflict, which was considered an unsurmountable challenge of the Geneva Process, that failed to unify the Syrian opposition, provided the guarantor states multiple opportunities to influence peacemaking through a wide range of actors and institutions.

The peace practices of the guarantor states clearly demonstrate a shift to a post-liberal era of peacemaking where the logic of power is reasserted. As opposed to the idealism of liberal peace, power peace is based on geopolitical interests rather than ideas and values. In the framework of Astana, power peace translated into the primacy of statism, territorial sovereignty, proxy war, and militarism. In that sense, Syrian peace bears a strong resemblance with the coercive, militaristic style of victors' peace (Heydemann 2020) and the pragmatic, top-down approach of realist peace (Ripsman 2020). The Syrian case also holds value in elucidating how pragmatic peace goes beyond the top-down approach and can instead be understood as a continuum of trends and practices (Wiuff Moe and

Steputtat 2018). This continuum includes the rise of complexity with mediators creating a mesh of initiatives rooted at several levels of peace, hybridity, and a bottom-up focus on localising efforts to stabilise the conflict. This is not to say that the ideational component is absent from the peace practices of the guarantor states. There is no doubt that Iran, Russia and Turkey share anti-Western sentiments. Besides, they all devoted many efforts to gaining soft power inside Syria through humanitarian aid and the development of their cultural influence in the educational field (Al Sakbani and Beaujouan 2024; Sosnowski and Robinson 2020). This cultural influence though, promotes the Shia religion in the case of Iran, and the Russian and Turco-Ottoman identities rather than anti-Western values. In fact, the pragmatism of geopolitical interests should not be opposed to the emotional character of ideas and values. An extensive body of academic work demonstrates the connection between ideas – especially in the domestic and foreign policy arenas – and socio-political power (Béland, Carstensen, and Seabrooke 2016; Kingdon 1984; Kuzemko 2014). Arguably, the three guarantors use ideational frameworks as a tool for power capture and consolidation rather than a tool to build an ideal of peace and a post-conflict socio-political system.

In Syria, power peace succeeded in stabilising and managing, at least part of, the conflict. The conflict effectively became more dual and less disintegrated in terms of factionalism[18] as several opposition groups were fully annihilated while others were geographically isolated in Idlib governorate in northwest Syria. Consequently, military fronts froze along with buffer zones and spheres of influence drawn in Astana, and direct confrontations and military violence decreased from 2017. That being said, power peace failed to effectively transform the conflict into an inclusive, sustainable peace system. Freezing conflict lines deepened the political and territorial fragmentation, and the country remains divided into four main areas governed by quasi-autonomous systems: the Salvation Government in Idlib, the Interim Government in the rest of the northwest, the Autonomous Administration in the northeast and the Syrian regime elsewhere. Furthermore, the so-called reconciliation agreements mentioned above were no more than 'displacement agreements' unilaterally decided and imposed by Russia (Amnesty International 2017). At the time of writing, it is believed that 60% of the population in Idlib governorate is made up of displaced Syrians who fled in the aftermath of 'peace' deals with the Russian military.[19] This demographic shift put a strain on services and resources, but also on social cohesion in Syrian opposition-held areas. Furthermore, all the displaced Syrians lost their right to property and citizenship, thereby becoming enemies of the Syrian regime (Sosnowski 2019). As for those who were able to stay in 'reconciled areas', the future is not brighter. Reconciliation agreements negatively impacted human security and the human rights of local populations, as well as humanitarian action (Beaujouan et al. 2023). Those who chose to stay live in fear of arrest campaigns and forced conscription. In the words of Abboud, the guarantor states and the Syrian regime 'actively crafted the continuity of violence as a structural feature of post-conflict order' (2021, 342). As such, local peace practices in Syria can be regarded as deeply illiberal and part of an elite pact that managed the conflict but certainly did not resolve it. Albeit less visible, these dynamics are also present at the national level of peacemaking. A member of the Constitutional Committee expressed regrets that the constitution-drafting processes became of tool for closed-door negotiations between the guarantor states and the Syrian regime:

> The regime portrayed itself as negotiating the new constitution and speaking to Syrians, while in fact, it only negotiates how to stay in power and it does this with the guarantor countries, not with us. We know that the regime representatives only attend meetings under the pressure of Russia.[20]

The divide between the Geneva and Astana peace processes has become more salient since the conflict between Russia and Ukraine broke out in February 2022. Switzerland officially condemned the Russian invasion of its neighbour two months later (UNGA 2022). In return, Russia accused the Geneva peace process on Syria of being politically biased and tried to extract the Constitutional Committee from the UN framework. More concretely, Moscow pushed for the meetings of the Committee to be held in places that do not host UN official representation, such as the UAE, Turkey, Oman, or Nur Sultan in Kazakhstan. However, the proposal was rejected by the representatives of the opposition and civil society. The attempts of UN special envoy Peterson to convince Damascus to resume meetings were unsuccessful. These tensions show that, despite the influence of the guarantor states over Syrian mediation efforts, power peace has not fully eclipsed the influence of liberal mediators.

Power peace or the decline of liberal peace in Syria?

It may be tempting to describe power peace in Syria as the monopoly of illiberal peace and the strengthening of authoritarian practices. A high number of Syrians consider the Geneva-led peace process to be clinically dead and the peace practices of the guarantor states have been described above as tactical tools of conflict management rather than conflict transformation. While initially established to achieve a political solution in accordance with UNSC resolution 2254 on 'Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition', the Astana peace process effectively kept the Syrian regime afloat despite gross violations of human rights and war crimes.[21] As such, the Astana track marked the shift from the legal legitimacy of the UN to the military legitimacy of guarantor states, whose peace effectively undermined the legal value of international resolutions but also accountability standards of human rights and social inclusion. Undoubtedly, power peace also signals the pre-eminence of stability and order over political transition and justice. As of today, many Syrians wonder: 'How can there be peace without justice?'.[22] The guarantor states also relied on asymmetric negotiations and imposed peace as a strategy to find an exit from the Syrian conflict. According to a political advisor for south Syria, the Astana Process was doomed to disappoint Syrians:

> Peace talks opposed a mainly military opposition with highly trained and skilful politicians and diplomats on the side of the Syrian regime. How could we expect inexperienced opposition to negotiate with Russians like Lavrov who representant a country that is a permanent member of the Security Council? We, Syrians, are manipulated, we are pawns in the hands of the powerful ones.[23]

His opinion was echoed by an adviser with the Syrian opposition, who recounted:

> I was discussing with Dr. Ahmed Tohme, the head of the opposition delegation at the Astana conference, about a statement issued after one of the official meetings. I was surprised by the content of the statement and asked him how he could sign the document when it included words against the opposition. He answered: "I did not see the statement and did not sign it". This is the reality of the Astana Process. Discussions are taking place between the Turks and the Russians, and results are imposed on Syrians.[24]

Furthermore, the peace practices of the guarantor states in Syria marked the shift from humanitarian concerns to the securitisation of peacemaking. Negotiations that involved the UN in the early years of the conflict emphasised human safety, such as prisoner exchange, humanitarian corridors, and the evacuation of the wounded.[25] They also included non-military signatories such as civilian representatives. However, since 2017, negotiations led in the framework of Astana have marginalised civilian representation and insisted on the security dimension of peace.[26] Instead, it seems that the guarantor states used the deteriorating humanitarian situation of the Syrians to justify al-Assad's political project, that is, to initiate the reconstruction of the country in an attempt to convince the international community that the conflict is over. Without an active conflict, it would be harder to justify the need for a political settlement and transition. Now that the conflict has officially stabilised, reconstruction in Syria might become the main bone of contention for future mediation efforts. Future negotiations will need to reconcile Astana's pragmatic will to start rebuilding the country and Geneva's refusal to allow al-Assad regime to sidestep its responsibility regarding its repeated violations of international law during the conflict.

While justified by liberal ideals of justice, the economic sanctions imposed on Syria by the West to prevent reconstruction have disastrous humanitarian consequences. Simultaneously, Russia – supported by China at the UNSC – has been cornering UN-led attempts to channel humanitarian aid to Syrian opposition-held areas, thereby helping the Syrian regime to politicise and weaponise humanitarian aid (Beaujouan 2021; Berti 2016). This co-optation of liberal institutions to advance authoritarian interests greatly undermined internal support for UN mediation efforts in Syria. As a result, areas that returned under the control of the Syrian regime are no longer accessible to independent and neutral (I)NGOs. This begs the question: While the guarantors vowed to monitor the implementation of a nationwide ceasefire, who monitors the actions of the guarantor states in Syria? Surely, the peace they imposed is far from the liberal ideals of 'the reformability of individuals and institutions, pluralism and toleration, the rule of law, and the protection of property' (Mac Ginty 2010, 393).

This does not, however, mean the end of liberal peace for Syria. First, one ought to pay attention to how local actors respond to the Astana peacebuilding model. Albeit rare, popular demonstrations have denounced the consequences of imposed peace since December 2022. In the southern governorate of Suweida, protestors angrily denounced the worsening economic conditions despite the official return of peace while in the north, hundreds protested a possible Ankara-Damascus reconciliation (Al Shami 2023). A journalist in Suweida analysed: 'Today, at the popular level, all the big actors of so-called peace are rejected. This includes Russia which used to have much more legitimacy than the regime among Syrians a couple of years ago. I think that people speak more openly against the regime and that these protests are the smoke that hides the fire'.[27]

Second, the pre-eminence of the Astana Process does not mark the complete withdrawal of traditional mediators from the Syrian file and discussions on future political arrangements. On the one hand, European countries remain the largest donors of aid and humanitarian programmes in Syria, providing the only humanitarian artery for the north-western regions (European Commission 2024). In addition, the guarantor countries and the Syrian regime know that any reconstruction process can only be undergone with the diplomatic and financial support of Western countries and international donor

organisations. Reversely, the economic and political reconstruction of post-conflict Syria cannot be delayed indefinitely by the West, and indeed, is core to the liberal peace model. Hence, future mediation efforts will need to integrate all actors of the Geneva and Astana processes.

Finally, it seems that the two main guarantors of Astana – Russia, and Turkey – started adopting a more passive stance towards the Syrian file, as they already made important political gains and do not want to be seen as further manipulating the peace process.[28] On the other hand, the US – though its involvement is not visible through the Geneva peace processes and close negotiations with Russia stopped after the eruption of the Ukraine crisis – still play a key role in decision-making and negotiations happening behind closed doors. For instance, in 2022, Turkey conducted bilateral meetings with both Russia and the US to negotiate the end of clashes with the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northeast Syria.[29] The US also played a key mediating role in the conflict that opposed their regional ally, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and several Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor in early September 2023.[30] In a few words, Syria is not slipping away from the West.

Hence, power peace in Syria blurred the distinction between liberal and illiberal peace. At the international and national levels of peace, the guarantor states have maintained the illusion of a liberal peace process within the framework of the UN by promoting the annihilation of violence but also inclusive institutions such as the Constitution Committee and the Civil Society Support Room. These practices served their interests in Syria but also the authoritarian project of Bashar al-Assad to remain in power. The UN model might be fictitious, but it remains largely used as a system of reference for mediation. Reversely, in the name of liberal ideals, Western states-imposed sanctions with disastrous humanitarian consequences and rejected any sort of socio-political reconstruction.

Moreover, the rigidity of the UN when it comes to negotiating with certain ideologically radical armed groups, or its perpetual search for humanitarian neutrality are major setbacks to achieving the goals of liberal peace (Beaujouan 2023a, 2023b). In Syria, both traditional and non-traditional mediators used considerable resources to enforce compliance of Syrian recalcitrant to their vision of peace. These few examples are clear indications that post-liberal peace in Syria is less about the monopoly of an illiberal model and more about a hybrid model where mediators of all types selectively use liberal and illiberal ideas and practices to promote their interests. If one is to accept that violence and conflict management have become tools of peacemaking, the post-liberal model calls for a reform of monitoring and accountability standards to ensure the protection of civilian populations and their most fundamental rights.

Rethinking the impact of power peace in Syria

> There is no longer an external importer and a local recipient of peace. There are only interests, a movement of history, and economic conditions. Any solution that restores hope to the people is acceptable to them, whether it comes from the UN, the US, Russia, or Turkey.[31]

This concluding section interrogates the consequence of power peace on political systems. The Syrian case is unique for its complexity and the emergence of juxtaposing peace processes led by actors with arguably competing ideas and interests. But its fate

also stands out from the countries that experienced a violent conflict in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Bashar al-Assad is the only domestic leader who remains in power despite thirteen years of armed struggle. The Syrian president owes much of his salvation to Russia and Iran. Clearly, Astana maintained a level of political stability where the Geneva peace process failed to negotiate the establishment of a liberal political order. But ensuring the regime survival of an authoritarian leader does not readily qualify Astana peace as authoritarian. Reversely, the objective of ousting an authoritarian leader does make an external intervention more liberal, as demonstrated by the US intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Importantly, in Syria, peace was not only externally imposed but was also shaped by the domestic context.

Before the advent of the conflict, Syrians suffered from a lack of political awareness and the country superimposed several levels of cleavages between ethno-sectarian communities and between Syrian citizens and the state that failed to coin a strong overarching national identity and meet participatory expectations (Hinnebusch 1982). These dynamics, coupled with the influence of external players such as the US and Israel, and regional events such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq, were strong leverages to the advent of the popular protests of 2011 and the insurgency that followed. In other words, at a time of peace, Syria was already crippled by violence and fragmentation, which were both used as a tool of power capture and consolidation by President Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000). During his rule, the father of the current president violently tamed any form of opposition, like in 1982 when up to 40,000 Sunni Syrians were massacred (Lobmeyer 1995). Hence, when Bashar al-Assad turned peaceful protests into a full-scale civil war in 2012, the violence was reminiscent of the authoritarian tendencies and illiberal forms of conflict management characterising his father's responses to domestic conflicts. As the hope of finding a peaceful resolution diminished, Bashar al-Assad was able to reaffirm his position as the dominant fragment at the head of a chaotic, yet standing, fierce state (Heydemann 2018).

Besides his tight relationship with key external supports within the Astana Process, al-Assad understood that his fate was bound to appear as the lesser evil and the head of a rocking, but floating state that could deliver a semblance of rule of law, officially supporting the drafting of a new constitution for instance, and stability. This strategy echoes Richmond and Mac Ginty's criticism of liberal peace and its focus on state centricity, which they argued, may worsen rather than improve authoritarian states, leading to pacification instead of constructive change (2014, 178). This critique was renewed by scholars of the spatial turn who encourage peacemakers to adopt a 'new imaginary that moves beyond state-centredness and is critical of an understanding of scales as fixed and of spaces as containers' (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel 2022, 539). The Syrian case seems to provide a good opportunity to inform such new imaginaries.

With the support of the guarantor states, the Syrian state survived the conflict and, as Bashar al-Assad likes to remind his interlocutors: 'We, Syria, have not changed'. This depiction takes us back to Ibn Khaldun's original use of *dawla* ('state' in Arabic) in the *Muqaddimah*: 'A state exists only insofar as it is held together and ruled by individuals and the group which they constitute, that is, the dynasty. When the dynasty disappears, the state, being identical with it, also comes to an end' (Khaldun 1967, 852). Effectively, it was only when opposition armed groups reached the countryside of Damascus and threatened to take the city's airport that Russia intervened in 2015. Almost ten years later, the

Syrian regime regained control over two thirds of the country and the outer boundaries of the Syrian state remained and transformed into a 'spatial envelope in which competing internal legitimacies – and perhaps even alternative forms of sovereignty – operate' (Vignal 2017, 811).

However, the Syrian case demonstrates that, even without regime change, the complexity of the conflict and the unspoken use of violence – both as a means of confrontation and conflict management – threatened the existence of the state and fundamentally altered the political order. If anything, the intervention of the guarantor states within the Astana framework stabilised the political unsettlement. In that sense, the pragmatism of power peace did not completely break from the liberal focus on state-centricity. Outside Syria particularly, the imaginary of the central Syrian state remains, with Assad at its head. Yet, the Syrian state remains contested – externally by the UN and the West but also by Turkey – and internally by three opposition governments. While the core state remains, in the Syrian peripheries, a number of 'governscapes' have emerged (Stepputat 2018), in which different types of non-state actors gained practical sovereignty and regulate the lives of thousands of Syrians (Beaujouan 2022). Hence, despite signs of normalisation, Syria is still in a state of political transition. To use the words of Boege and colleagues, Syria is a hybrid political order, not a fragile state (2009). Al-Assad's legitimacy is void on the ground, and in the words of an inhabitant of Daraa governorate: 'There is a certain level of control and stability due to the presence of the military, but the state remains absent everywhere'. While deeply illiberal authoritarian at its core, fragmentation has enabled some liberalness to breathe into opposition local political and civil governance institutions in terms of inclusion and toleration (Beaujouan 2022). To conclude, the hybridity of post-liberal peacemaking is reflected in Syria's political system which is shaped by violence and power contest instead of an internationally negotiated settlement. Despite the claims of normalisation and stabilisation, Syria remains in a state of transition and, whether via liberal or illiberal means, the struggle for the state continues.

Notes

1. FGD conducted by a Syrian research team member with seven (female) civilians, Daraa governorate (Syria), January 2023 (in person).
2. Based on PA-X's countries/entities denominations: Bahrain, Iran, Iraq (including Kurdistan Region), Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
3. PeaceRep 'Global Transitions' series explores how non-ODA states such as Russia, China, UAE, Turkey, and Qatar intervene in peace and transition processes, and with what goal; https://peacerep.org/research/geopolitical-transitions/.
4. The mission will be passed to three more special envoys: Lakhdar Brahimi (September 2012 to May 2014); Staffan de Mistura (September 2014 to December 2018); Geir O. Pedersen (January 2019-present).
5. Interview conducted by the author with a political advisor for the Syrian opposition, Amman (Jordan), December 2022 (in person).
6. Interview conducted by a Syrian research team member with a political and civil activist, countryside of Damascus (Syria), September 2022 (in person).
7. See for instance Damascus Truce I between Bayt Sahem and Babila (17 February 2014), https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/1527.

8. Interview conducted by the author with a former OCHA staff, Gaziantep (Turkey), October 2022 (in person).
9. Interviews conducted by the author with three humanitarian workers, Aleppo governorate (Syria), March 2023 (online).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Interview conducted by the author with a civil representative, Azaz (Syria), March 2023 (online).
13. For instance, Turkey ensured that the Kurdish minority will be denied representation in the Committee.
14. Interview conducted by the author with a member of the Constitutional Committee, Gaziantep (Turkey), October 2022 (in person).
15. See for instance East Qalamoun Ceasefire (5 September 2017), https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/2001 and Agreement in East Ghouta and Jubar between the Free Syrian Army and Russia (16 August 2017) https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/1999.
16. Signed agreement presented by the Russian officials to opposition in al-Waer (08 March 2017), https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewdocument/3630.
17. Interview conducted by a Syrian research team member with a former military commander, Idlib governorate (Syria), October 2022 (in person).
18. For an analysis of fragmentation as factionalism, see Bakke et al. (2012).
19. Interview conducted by a Syrian research team member with a member of a local council, Azaz (Syria), November 2022 (in person).
20. Interview conducted by the author with a member of the Constitutional Committee, Istanbul (Turkey), November 2022 (in person).
21. Interview by the author with a humanitarian activist, Amman (Jordan), November 2022 (in person).
22. FGD conducted by a Syrian research team member with seven (female) civilians, Daraa governorate (Syria), January 2023 (in person).
23. Interview conducted by the author with a former political advisor for an opposition armed group in the south of Syria, Amman (Jordan), December 2022 (in person).
24. Interview conducted by the author with a political advisor for the Syrian opposition, Amman (Jordan), December 2022 (in person).
25. Such stipulations can be seen in the Homs Hudna Agreement (07 February 2014), https://www.peaceagreements.org/viewmasterdocument/1525.
26. Interview conducted by the author with a political advisor for the Syrian opposition, Amman (Jordan), December 2022 (in person); Interview conducted by a Syrian research team member with a former military commander, Idlib governorate (Syria), October 2022 (in person).
27. Interview conducted by the author with a journalist, Suweida (Syria), January 2023 (online).
28. Interview conducted by the author with a lawyer and former member of the Constitutional Committee, Gaziantep (Turkey), October 2022 (in person).
29. Interview conducted by the author with a formal Minister in the Kurdistan Regional Government, Erbil (Kurdistan Region Iraq), September 2022 (in person).
30. Interview conducted by the author with a security analyst, Amman (Jordan), November 2022 (in person).
31. Interview conducted by a Syrian research team member with an engineer and political activist, Aleppo governorate (Syria), October 2022 (in person).

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