

A New Round of Geneva Talks:

Priorities for a process towards peace and transition in Syria

With the fourth round of Geneva talks set to begin on 23 February, Syrians have lost all faith in the international community for failing to protect them from war crimes and find a peaceful solution to the conflict. In advance of this new round of talks, PAX recalls the critical steps it has previously outlined that must be taken to increase human security, ensure the broadest range of Syrian people are represented, and address war crimes and crimes against humanity so that the process leads to durable peace.

Improve human security first

As earlier negotiations have shown, in order for a political process to gain the trust of the Syrian population, a genuine effort to improve human security must be taken from the outset. Looking at the most urgent steps that can and should be taken by the international community to protect civilians in Syria, PAX recommends focusing on the following:

- End attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure by all sides; the use of indiscriminate and banned weapons such as landmines and cluster munitions; and the use in populated areas of explosive weapons with wide area effects;
- Lift sieges and allow unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid; and
- Agree on the release of political prisoners and forcibly disappeared persons.

Secure broad participation of Syrians

The formation of negotiating delegations has been opaque and seemingly random. The UN has not put procedures in place to secure the broad participation of Syrians or to ensure it will be inclusive and participatory. Another concern is the lack of involvement of civil society, as they are the ones who are currently working on the ground and ultimately will play a key role in successfully translating political agreements into practical steps. Involving civil society does not mean they should have a place at the negotiating table, but rather a formal, ongoing, and transparent consultation process should be put in place. Ad hoc civil society invitations are not enough. The process should include the following to ensure it is inclusive and participatory:

- Secured participation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees;
- Participation of representatives from different geographical, religious, and ethnic backgrounds;
- Proportional women's participation;
- Participation of youth;
- Involvement of groups designated as "terrorist" via back channels; and
- A civil society consultation mechanism formalising the role of civil society.

Address war crimes and crimes against humanity

An enormous amount of war crimes and grave human rights violations have been committed by the warring parties in Syria. Given the severe suffering of civilians from these violations, it is unthinkable that any political process can be successful or sustainable unless it properly addresses these violations and the trauma they caused. Although justice is normally an issue addressed towards the end of a peace process, it is essential that early political agreements do not close the door on justice and obstruct transitional justice in the later stages, for example, by agreeing on amnesties for certain war criminals. Because civil society plays a key role in monitoring violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and in supporting the victims of these violations, cooperation with civil society should start immediately to develop transitional justice strategies. To ensure war crimes and crimes against humanity are addressed:

- Transitional justice must be a central element of the process;
- Victims' participation mechanisms must be developed; and
- Civil society must be involved in developing a transitional justice strategy.

Without taking the critical steps outlined above, the latest round of talks will yet again fail, prolonging the suffering and abandonment of Syrian civilians and preventing any durable solution to the conflict.