UNITING FOR THE SHARED BATTLE

SHORT-TERM CEASEFIRES IN MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS TO PREVENT HUMANITARIAN DISASTER

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SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded the world of the need to prevent a sudden unforeseen health crisis from leading to total ruin. A pandemic or similar major health crisis cannot alone be counted on to align the interests of the Middle East's complex conflicts between states, non-state actors, and regional and extra-regional powers on the need for a ceasefire, but it could provide the context for a ripe moment to broker one. Short-term ceasefires, if built substantively and with critical buy-in from the most powerful actors, are achievable to facilitate humanitarian work to prevent or mitigate outbreaks amongst highly vulnerable populations in conflict zones.

PROBLEM: CONFLICTS BLOCKING HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN THE WAKE OF A MAJOR HEALTH CRISIS

The Middle East has sustained tremendous tumult in the past decade, leaving many countries already with systemic governance deficiencies even more vulnerable to instability. Being economically strained beyond their limits and racked by conflict, they are also unable to properly cope with refugee inflows. The threat COVID-19 poses for the conflict-ridden region has proven just how quickly a disaster can catch leaders off guard and potentially turn dire situations into uncontrollable catastrophes. New unforeseen major health crises for the region are inevitable, whether they be another pandemic or drought-induced famine, a particular danger as global temperatures rise. Standing in the way of a crisis response effort are the region's ongoing conflicts and the competing interests of their belligerent parties and stakeholders, which often torpedo ceasefire attempts, no matter the humanitarian toll.

Conflicts divert states' resources that otherwise could go toward mitigating a health crisis within their own borders, while war-torn countries are left completely incapacitated. In the effort to prevent an outbreak in one area from completely decimating a country and from spreading or creating other problems for the entire region, conflict zones represent the highest at-risk areas. Humanitarian work, such as that of the International Rescue Committee, cannot be done under fire and is extremely difficult inside failed states.

Without regional coordination during a major health crisis to contain impending humanitarian disaster in conflict zones, war-affected states will most likely lack the capacity to do so themselves. And yet, other states may have an interest in preventing instability in the regional neighborhood, such as for economic or security reasons. Yet others, such as regional powers, may not be directly affected by conflict but still have a stake in them. Thus, failing to coordinate with these players would also be a missed opportunity.

Currently, if a health disaster strikes, the likelihood of a ceasefire is subject mainly to the whims of the most powerful parties (e.g. a regime with control over the military) and stakeholders (e.g. external backers like Russia). While it could be that powerful actors might use their position over weaker ones to take the calculated risk of temporarily ceasing much of their activity and apply pressure on their proxies to follow suit, experience from COVID-19 and other health-related disasters show these stronger parties typically do not restrain themselves, as seen by continued fighting in Libya and Syria in 2020.

Conflict parties looking for any opportunity to change their fortunes on the battlefield may even be using the chaos surrounding a disaster to instigate an attack while their enemies may be weakened or reeling financially. And even if they do not desire to leverage the situation, they may do so preemptively out of fear that the other side is planning to do exactly that first. Whatever their reasons, there will likely always be parties capitalizing on the chaos of a sudden disaster. By way of example, the Syrian Regime has long blocked and bombed aid convoys in attempts to

weaponize the humanitarian disaster it largely created and has been obstructing humanitarian efforts in the North of the country since the COVID-19 outbreak (United Nations 2018, the New York Times 2017, The Hill 2020). Meanwhile, ISIS. has exploited lapses in security in Syria and Iraq since COVID-19 to launch new offensives (Cruickshank 2020)

SHORT-TERM CEASEFIRES

During a major health crisis, ceasefires in conflict zones could be brokered by relevant regional parties and credible mediators to facilitate safe and effective humanitarian work to hedge off potential humanitarian calamity. Proposals for short-term ceasefires with stipulated time-periods would have a higher chance for parties to reach an agreement since they would not involve the added element of conflict resolution.

Naturally, hurdles abound for achieving such ceasefires, even if a conflict's direct belligerents and stakeholders are all somehow onboard. Challenges include establishing a manageable framework, ensuring compliance and disincentivizing defection, navigating power competition and engaging states and non-state actors that do not recognize one another and are formally at war. Occasional flare-ups are likely even if such an agreement is reached. Yet if parties can mostly adhere to a conflict-suspension mechanism, whether formal or even informal, then humanitarian teams would be able to carry out vital operations and infrastructure building toward containing the effects of the health crisis in areas otherwise inaccessible to them.

A major health crisis could speed up any emerging confluence of interests for a ceasefire as parties may find themselves facing some similar constraints, fears and dilemmas. This is because such a crisis represents a unique, sudden, calamitous threat from which no area in a conflict zone is exempted. Again, this concern does not mean it can alter the cost-benefit calculus for every actor, some of whom may in fact seek to exploit the humanitarian costs or whose citizens may not be living in a conflict zone and therefore less concerned. But if these actors are already somewhat in range of showing interest in a ceasefire—that is, if they are already approaching a mutually harmful stalemate—these crises could create an opportune << ripe moment >> in which parties seek a << way out. >> (Zartman and Berman 1982).

Regional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that a major health crisis can be so taxing as to largely create a ripe moment for short-term ceasefires. Since United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' appeal for a global ceasefire (though not entirely as a result), a Saudi-UAE unilateral ceasefire in the Yemen conflict with their Houthi adversaries was moderately successful for two months (Guetteres 2020). A truce of sorts between Israel and Hamas, as well as Israel and Hezbollah, fared to a similarly adequate degree during the pandemic's first wave, and there was for some months cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority despite Israel's West Bank annexation rhetoric (Mackinnon 2020; Ahren 2020). In South Sudan and in Syria (in the case of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces), various actors declared a unilateral ceasefire and somewhat followed through, offering the proposition that parties need not necessarily come together and agree in writing (International Crisis Group and Al-Jazeera 2020).

One can conceive how short-term ceasefires during the threat of a major health crisis can be achieved by drawing lessons from how conflicting parties have in the recent past come to embrace ceasefires in order to seize a ripe moment, and how their successes and failures can help mediators going forward to develop more durable short-term arrangements.

INCLUSION OF ALL RELEVANT ACTORS

Given the track record of conflict in the region, any ceasefire would most likely be contingent upon the inclusion of not just state parties, but also non-state, sub-state, or quasi-state actors. The latter are as integral as the former to almost any given recent conflict in the region, if not more so. This constellation of conflict parties can easily make it more difficult to reach agreements since states often refuse to acknowledge the authority of non-state actors with whom they are at war and tend to take advantage of these actors' lack of official recognition on the world stage to delegitimize them and justify their own attempts to suppress them.

Regional powers (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey) are also typically principal actors in the region's conflicts, since they are often benefactors to regimes and non-state actors, which act as their proxies. Therefore, a ceasefire will likely not be successful without their commitment. The same can be said of heavily-involved extra-regional powers, which would not necessarily sign a ceasefire agreement but rather lend it their support and influence. Getting this support can be tricky for many reasons, as demonstrated by the United States' and Russia's rejection behind the scenes of the UN global ceasefire on grounds that it would interfere with counter-terrorism operations (Lynch 2020). When extra-regional powers such as these two compete in the same conflict, it is important that they come to some common understanding on endorsing a given ceasefire by disincentivizing their regional partners from acting as spoilers. Doing so would create an extra layer of stability for the ceasefire. The March 2020 Turkish-Russian ceasefire in northwestern Syria attests to the importance of regional and extra-regional influence in halting fighting in conflict states. However, as this case shows, the Russian and Turkish-backed forces did not jointly set out a safe shelter for the displaced, thereby missing the opportunity to reduce the suffering in Idlib. This implies the necessity for the key stakeholders in a conflict to incorporate the humanitarian aspect as an important, if not integral element of ceasefires.

Incentivizing stakeholder or external power participation has its limitations. However, a place to start is for influential parties to support a ceasefire and convene it. In Syria, an early agreed-upon Arab League-brokered plan to deescalate the violence went nowhere since China, and more crucially, Russia, neglected to put pressure on the Syrian regime to adhere to its commitments. By contrast, the Astana talks succeeded in an intensive and long-term ceasefire (far more ambitious than what is needed for a short-term one) by allowing key stakeholders Russia, Turkey, and Iran to have a forum in which they could set the tone, unimpeded by other powers like the US, and free to exclude some rebel groups from participating.

The Astana talks also emphasize the importance of including the actual fighting rebel parties, rather than the Geneva talk's approach of negotiations between political actors. As for the excluded rebel parties (SDF, ISIS, al-Nusra Front – becoming Hayat Tahrir al Sham in January 2017), this choice may be problematic for quickly arranging a short-term ceasefire, unless all other parties agree that they can still be targeted (as was the case with ISIS and al-Nusra following the International Syria Support Group-negotiated ceasefire). Still, the Syrian Democratic Forces' response to the COVID-19 outbreak of declaring a unilateral ceasefire proves the general point that ceasefire schemes need not necessarily formally include all actors if other actors are temporarily putting down their weapons.

As for how much a major health crisis could incentivize influential parties in a complex conflict like Syria's, the March 2020 Turkish-Russian ceasefire itself concluded in a ripe moment when the threat of major escalation and direct military confrontation by the two powers (BBC 2020). If the given health crisis similarly threatens both conflict parties' troops, then it is feasible that they would also find themselves in a ripe moment for a short-term ceasefire.

STARTING SMALL AND EMBRACING FAILURE

One option to make an impact without getting caught up in the web of actors in a complex conflict is to opt for local ceasefires in certain areas within a conflict zone. Of the 106 local short-term ceasefires in the Syrian conflict,

72 percent held between 2011-2017. This high success rate is on account of the outperformance by domestic and informal peacemaking, compared with formal and external efforts to ceasefires between multiple groups and fronts (Karakus and Svensson 2017). In a conflict less complex than Syria's, parties may want to increase the scope of these local ceasefires to incorporate several fronts and actors all at once.

On a global scale, more than 80 percent of all ceasefires in recent decades were broken, but evidence suggests that failure actually incentivizes parties to try again, and with a better picture for a roadmap (Snyder 2016). Conflict parties and their mediators should therefore keep in mind that while the substance of a ceasefire is critical to its success, they should not be so overly concerned with deterring any possible violation to the point that it prevents the short-term ceasefire from being reached at all. Even a failed ceasefire can yield net positive results in terms of gaining new understanding, serving as a confidence-building step, incentivizing more ceasefire talks, providing precious time for humanitarian teams to operate.

MEDIATION

Brokering short-term ceasefires could be led by a designated body of a reputable international organization, such as the UN's Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs (DPPA), an office styled after the UN's Special Envoy for Syria, the UN Peacebuilding Commission, or United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). In the case that these organizations are not seen as credible by a conflict's actors, ceasefire-brokering efforts could also be led by a new body composed of opposing great power stakeholders so as to carry more influence and to prevent one's local conflict parties from acting as spoilers. This latter option may be more relevant both for Middle Eastern conflicts, where bodies like the UN are so distrusted while regional/great powers bear considerable influence, and for short-term ceasefires where the goal is not to sow the seeds for conflict resolution but to create immediate relief. Whichever the case, the supervising body would be in charge of tracking conflict de-escalation, overseeing patrols to prevent a new escalation, and handling complaints of violations.

External third-party mediation may not be a necessity, however, especially if parties still have yet to arrive at a ripe moment for a conflict-wide short-term ceasefire. In the same study that found that 72 percent of local Syrian short-term ceasefires were respected, insider mediators (<< insider-partial >>) and confidence-building measures were discovered to be more aligned with success than external third-party mediators, and provided higher quality arrangements (Karakus and Svensson 2017).

GROUNDING CEASEFIRES IN WRIT-TEN AGREEMENTS OR SECURITY REGIMES

Achieving ceasefires (or peace for that matter) is contingent on two necessary conditions: the ripeness of the moment and the substance of the arrangement (Zartman 2000). If a major health crisis can provide the first, the second can be achieved by building a ceasefire based on transforming converging interests among parties into a **written agreement**, or alternatively a **security regime**—a set of << principles, rules, and norms that permit nations to be restrained in their behavior in the belief that others will reciprocate >> (Jervis 2020).

A written agreement would strengthen commitment and can be more far-reaching in scope since it is done in the open. It would feature a specific length of time, with an option for renewal. It could entail a mechanism for mutual supervision, thereby reducing uncertainty and misperception. It could include some small confidence and security-building measures to increase the strength of the short-term ceasefire. A step further would be for a body overseeing the ceasefire to publish a monthly report on how well conflict parties have adhered to it. This activity would consequently signal to them that

their actions are being watched and they can be held accountable, thereby increasing the cost of their non-compliance or defection (International Crisis Group 2020).

While written agreements are the preferred option due to their strength, a security regime may be the only option for parties without formal diplomatic ties—so long as there is third-party mediation. For example, since 1974 (five years before before a peace treaty), Egypt and Israel have publicly committed to a limited security regime whereby the US circulates intelligence on each party's movements—an arrangement that also makes defection less attractive by lengthening warning times (Lebow 2018).

Likewise, such parties without diplomatic relations may not want to be perceived as upgrading ties or acknowledging the other's authority. A tacit regime, defined as << regular but implicit references to informal rules […] common along with behavior that is consistent with some independently inferred rules, would circumvent this issue >> (Levy and Zurn 1994, 5). A tacit regime on the heels of a major health crisis could simply consist of indications by parties that they have committed to suspend fighting and to allow free access to humanitarian aid or free access for humanitarian workers. Mediating bodies could still guide conflict parties with specific steps to facilitate humanitarian work (i.e. freedom of movement, people and aid within a defined area), without having the parties officially commit to a ceasefire, yet privately choosing to observe it. These steps should not be overly ambitious; otherwise, some parties may find it too implausible to trust and therefore choose to ignore the ceasefire appeal.

Still, tacit regimes remain weak because they are harder to prevent from unraveling due to defection, which is more likely since belligerents cannot be sure of one another's intentions. This is where secret, indirect channels of communication can be critical to opening low-key dialogue to signal an interest to deconflict, without requiring parties to alter their overall political policy vis-a-vis the other.

Such back channels would be facilitated through a third party, for which regional states like Oman and Jordan or rather some trusted third-party state or individual will fit the role. They are considered as a model of balance on regional issues due to their historical role in bridging

state and non-state actors is more problematic inasmuch as the sides may be less likely to risk legitimizing the other through these talks, as well as because certain non-state actors may be difficult to reach or may not have a consolidated leadership.

INCENTIVIZING COMPLIANCE AND FURTHER BUY-IN

Regardless of the type of regime, further incentives could be added by states involved in the region's humanitarian assistance, especially the EU, the US and Japan, to encourage compliance: addressing social and economic difficulties facing belligerents and their constituents (International Crisis Group 2020). If the parties need water and medical supplies, for instance, providing these could convince them to temporarily cease their military activities. Assistance from outside parties (for development, reconstruction, food supplies) could be contingent on a conflict party's support for a ceasefire, and acceptance of the principle that other belligerents can be afforded access to assistance. In the case of Syria, sending virus testing supplies to the Assad regime would be contingent on its commitment not to interfere with such supplies also being transported to Turkish-backed rebel groups or civilians in need, for instance. States in the region, international institutions, advocacy groups, and extra-regional powers could increase interest and pressure parties to adopt ceasefires by casting non-adhering belligerents as spoilers endangering the region (<< naming and shaming >>), while donor countries and institutions (e.g. World Bank) could leverage prospective financial and developmental assistance to incentivize buy-in.

Other incentives could be conceived of, such as temporary relief from sanctions or counter-terrorism targeting as long as the ceasefire lasts. These incentives would work best on small local actors but less so with rogue state actors and powerful stakeholders. Again, conflict parties simply may not take any such << softer >> incentives, especially those like the Assad regime which is consolidating their power. And yet, these incentives may provide the boost needed to favor a ceasefire if there already exists an interest in temporary quiet on the battle front in order to divert political energy to mitigating the effects of a major health crisis.

RESISTANCE

Resistance to ceasefires should still be expected, even if all of the aforementioned stipulations and incentives are included. Considering many Middle Eastern conflicts involve armed groups whose authority is partial at best, even if its leaders commit to an agreement, they cannot guarantee that all of their members will comply. This is liable especially in cases where non-state actors control various isolated pockets of territory, in which coordination and enforcement are difficult and easily undermined by local warlords. Then there are actors that simply may not be willing to cooperate no matter what incentives are thrown at them. It is hard to picture some future incarnation of ISIS on the ascent agreeing to dowse its own flames for an enemy and its civilians that it does not even consider to be deserving of life. Indeed, ISIS explicitly stated it sought to continue fighting in light of the COVID-19 outbreak as its enemies' efforts to combat the virus put a financial burden on its adversaries (International Crisis Group 2020). Finally, there exists the risk that ceasefires in the short run will lead to a military buildup that could enable prolonged conflict in the long run. This is precisely the concern of how the March 2020 Russian-Turkish ceasefire will end—the Syrian regime will launch an offensive against radical elements among the Turkish-backed mili

tias (Gurcan 2020). These challenges to the ceasefire mechanism, however, do not outweigh the benefits of attaining even a partial secession of atrocities, especially since the humanitarian response in the initial weeks of a major health outbreak are the most crucial. Also, counterintuitively, even failed ceasefires tend to incentivize parties to agree to ceasefires in the future (Snyder 2016).

CONCLUSION

In sum, a ceasefire can be an achievable goal in the wake of a major health crisis if parties to a conflict can act upon the ripe moment for negotiation that it may create, and to work toward short-term arrangements. Short-term ceasefires could manifest as written agreements or (informal) security regimes, would likely need to be led by the dominant powers if seeking for it to span countrywide, and in more complex conflicts may alternatively be better suited as small local agreements for certain fronts. Further incentives for the parties exist, but prerequisites include finding these mutual interests and having the blessing of key stakeholder powers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To promote the vital need for ceasefires during a regional health crisis, proponents must exploit any ripe moment made possible by the current COVID-19 pandemic. The chances and speed for brokering ceasefires during such a looming threat will depend on how quickly mediation bodies can organize, and how onboard the key conflict and stakeholder parties to a conflict are.

- Regional and external stakeholder powers, whether in a current conflict or not, should use the fresh memory of the COVID-19 experience to devise an understanding to consider de-escalating conflict if a subsequent major regional health crisis takes hold. If key powers in the region like Russia or the US do not do this on their own, then European Union (EU) heads of state such as Germany can adopt this agenda in interactions with them (especially while COVID-19

remains a constant topic on every state's agenda). Since external powers also have an interest in the stability of the region and during a health crisis there will always be a common threat on an allied population, EU heads of state can bring it up to impress the need to openly facilitate humanitarian work when disaster strikes. Advocates on the sidelines such as the EU or UN Secretary General can add greater impetus for ceasefires by stressing the threat of the major health crisis in order to raise awareness of it as an opportunity for a way out of conflicting parties' mutual hurting stalemate.

- Regarding mediation, conflict stakeholders can either use existing ceasefire bodies or create new ones to broker ceasefires early on. They should strive for written agreements, but not dwell on it to the point that they impede an imperfect but adequate short-term

ceasefire and if they can encourage a coalescing security regime instead. International bodies like the UN DPPA should be ready to step in if these stakeholders will give it a mandate to mediate. Conflict parties need not wait, however, for this external approach if they themselves can effect short-term ceasefires on local fronts. Research institutes and civil society organizations can help with the realm of ideas for humanitarian-driven advocates or prospective mediators by studying what is needed and what can be left out of short-term ceasefires, as well as the micro-dynamics of peacemaking, in order to develop better understandings on how to encourage these local ceasefires without the need for cooperation from major powers or for larger ceasefires that may not be able to materialize.

- Belligerents themselves should explore indirect back-channels of communication to adversarial powers in case they ever may need to relate that they would be in favor of exploring temporary de-escalation. The same goes for powers who may want to get in contact with certain rebel groups.

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