



Rethinking Ceasefires' Ability to Alleviate Civilian Suffering

Evidence From the Syrian Civil War

Policy Issue

Ceasefires have conventionally been considered as a way to temporarily halt violence or as a stepping stone towards a peace agreement. Instead, those working on armed conflict, such as scholars, conflict negotiators, policymakers, military personnel, and humanitarians, must think about the effects of ceasefires more broadly, outside of their potential to reduce violence. This is important if they are to make more informed, practical, and realistic decisions to alleviate the suffering of civilians during wartime.

The Multi-Faceted Impact of Ceasefires

Ceasefires rarely only “cease fire.” They are also not always positive and beneficial. Instead, they are part of complex military and political contestations. They can be tools that actors in civil wars use for their own ends – ends that are invariably much broader than militarily winning or losing. In other words, they are used as a means of strategic statebuilding. Without a more nuanced understanding of ceasefire agreements by scholars, conflict negotiators, policymakers, military personnel, and humanitarians, state and non-state actors in civil wars will continue using these agreements for their own political and military ends.

Insights from Syria and Beyond

Marika Sosnowski’s recent book, *Redefining Ceasefires: Wartime Order and Statebuilding in Syria* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), explores how ceasefires are not purely military instruments but have been used in Syria (and other cases such as Myanmar, Israel, and

Palestine) to justify the seizure of property, consolidate political power, challenge or change rights to citizenship, and engineer demographics. In Syria, ceasefires have given the Assad regime pretexts to enact discriminatory laws, destroy property documents such as land titles, and administer prejudicial reconstruction projects.

Local ceasefires used during the Syrian civil, from as early as 2013 war mandated the evacuation of citizens from their homes in places like Old Homs and Daraya. Subsequently, a raft of Presidential decrees were enacted to permanently reappropriate their properties. The combination of these two events led to reconstruction and development projects such as Basila City (which ironically means “Peace City” in old Aramaic), Marouta, and Homs Dream that were then built on the land acquired via the ceasefire agreements. These development projects prevent the return of residents to their homes which were evacuated under ceasefire deals and formalize the permanent displacement of thousands. The written terms of ceasefire agreements provide the conditions for, and aid in, establishing this reality.



Photo Credit: Aladdin Hammami, Unsplash.

Recommendations for a Nuanced Approach

If Syria's ceasefires have taught us anything, it is that the assumption that ceasefires are inherently positive is naively misguided. Going forward, recommendations for conflict negotiators, policymakers, military personnel, and humanitarians include negotiating specifically worded ceasefire terms (such as those around territorial or troop delineations, the location of arms depots, troop movements, etc.), which may help conflict parties adhere to them. Also, wording such as "humanitarian ceasefire," "reconciliation agreements," "de-escalation," and "de-confliction" should not be taken at face value, as they can instill a false belief that the ceasefire is positive and humanitarian. Finally, be wary of mechanisms drafted into the ceasefire terms to monitor signatories' compliance. Conflict parties often use these monitoring mechanisms as scapegoats to avoid implementing the terms of the ceasefire, or as someone/thing to blame when the ceasefire breaks down.

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Want to Know More? Listen to Governance Uncovered with Marika Sosnowski!

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