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Negotiating statehood through ceasefires: Syria's de-escalation zones

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines how ceasefires can influence elements of statehood. It adds to scholarship that views statehood as being in a continuous process of change by conceptualising international ceasefires as the negotiation of an embryonic type of wartime order that has ramifications for how power and authority are dispersed among competing actors in civil war. Through the example of the Syrian de-escalation zones, the paper suggests that the ceasefire not only affected the use of violence but recalibrated relations between international and local actors for control over diplomacy, security, territory, and citizenship.

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There has been a wealth of scholarship about how violence shapes the actions, relationships, and legitimacy of actors in civil wars.[1] Authors have pointed out how the use of violence is instrumental in shaping heterarchic and hybrid governance systems,[2] adds or detracts from the legitimacy non-state armed groups are able to call upon at both the local[3] and international levels[4] as well as how it influences relations between armed groups and civilians.[5] However, rather than focus solely on violence, this paper explores the proposition that the construction of order is also implicated in the formation of civil war dynamics. While it may initially seem counterintuitive to discuss order at the same time as violence and conflict, much of the scholarship on wartime order sees the two phenomena as being fundamentally linked.[6] As such, there have also been many explorations into how it is not only violence that is influential in shaping people's lives during war but also how order is constructed, promulgated, and utilised.[7]

This article homes in on a particular moment in the codification of order during wartime, in the form of a ceasefire agreement, and examines how ceasefires can influence elements of statehood. It does this by adding to

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scholarship that sees statehood not as fixed but rather in a continuous process of change.[8] In this conceptualisation, statehood is a dynamic process of negotiation and contestation for the accumulation of power and authority by different actors in both peace and wartime. As Tobias Hagmann and Didier Péclard point out, 'A wide range of actors, state officials and non-state actors are involved in "doing the state"'.[9] Taking this into account, ceasefires can potentially be seen as much more than simply the 'rules and modalities for conflict parties to stop fighting'.[10] Ceasefires are actually better conceptualised as the manufacturing and imposition of an embryonic type of wartime order on complex political systems.[11] As such, they represent a moment of codification, through the text of the ceasefire agreement, certain aspects of the ever-changing phenomenon of the state that then have implications for how power and authority are dispersed on the ground.

Using this work on the dynamic nature of statehood as a starting point, I argue that we can move beyond traditional understandings of ceasefires that focus primarily on their ability to halt violence[12] or as a necessary inclusion in broader war to peace transitions[13] to see ceasefires as tools used by competing actors in civil wars to gain control over resources and areas that best benefit their interests.[14] While stopping or transforming violence is certainly one potential goal of actors negotiating ceasefires, their designs over other areas of contested control are also at stake in ceasefire negotiations. These include diplomacy, security, institutions of governance, economic networks, territory, and citizenship.[15] If a multiplicity of actors are engaged in overlapping and competing claims to rule, then the particular authority that emerges is thus a dynamic product of a process of negotiation.[16] Ceasefires arguably provide a locus for such statehood negotiation.

The paper is structured in three parts. The first offers a theoretical discussion about how the literature on statehood and ceasefires can be combined by highlighting that ceasefires do more than only stop violence but facilitate the creation of particular types of wartime order that has ramifications for the construction of statehood.[17] In the second section, the article examines the implications for statehood of an internationally negotiated ceasefire from the Syrian civil war and suggests that while the ceasefire was successful in decreasing violence for a time, it also affected actors' control over the contested areas of diplomacy, security, territory, and citizenship. It did this by augmenting Russian control over the diplomatic and security arena, Turkish control over the territory of northern Syria, and by facilitating reconciliation agreements that enabled for the defection of opposition leaders thereby consolidating the Syrian government's control over rebel populations but also bolstering the autonomy of militias that could cause future instability. The third and final section of the paper uses the Syrian example to more thoroughly discuss the interactions between the ceasefire's international signatories and power-plays by actors at the local level as well as the practical

implications of such an analysis. The detailed account of the Syrian ceasefire and its ramification is based on publicly available documentation such as reporting, statements, and policy documents, which is then deepened with expert interviews with nine Syrian, Western, and Russian conflict analysts. These analysts were chosen because of their ability to provide details about some of the underlying processes, motivations, and dynamics surrounding the establishment of the ceasefire that are not otherwise visible.[18]

Ceasefires and statehood

This paper adds to scholarship on the amorphous and evolving nature of statehood as advanced by authors such Christian Lund, Tobias Hagmann, and Didier Péclard.[19] In their conceptualisation, statehood is not only about how actors control and wield violence but more related to how authority and power are negotiated, gathered and contested by different actors at different levels of analysis.[20] These processes of 'negotiation, contestation, and bricolage' are dynamic and always evolving, therefore 'stateness' is not static, but can wax and wane and is never definitively formed.[21] In an environment like a civil war where 'different social forces in society strive for political control and domination',[22] the state becomes just one of the many actors competing for control over central resources.[23]

Taking these ideas of statehood as being in a constant process of change as a starting point, I add to this literature by thinking through the dynamics that ceasefires bring to these systems of complex political order. While there have been exceptions,[24] so far, the scholarship on ceasefires has tended to see violence as something that needs to be ameliorated through the notional order a ceasefire offer's[25] or as something to be sequenced between war and a peace agreement.[26] Consequently, ceasefires have largely been defined and considered successful predominantly in terms of their ability to halt violence and reduce conflict recidivism rather than having implications for broader types of military and political contestations.[27] The potential for ceasefires to alter military campaigns, such as allowing warring parties the time and space to rearm, manoeuvre troops, or resupply is well known.[28] It is also understood that conflict parties do not always negotiate in good faith but rather use deception and sleight of hand in ceasefire negotiations to their own ends.[29] However, if we apply the logic of the above discussion on the evolving nature of statehood to ceasefires, we can see that the order ceasefires create may have a variety of consequences for a range of areas of contested control. As such, ceasefires are perhaps better conceptualised as a space (or different spaces) of wartime order that function as a 'negotiation table': a locus where certain aspects of statehood are formalised, that have the ability to influence a wide variety of statehood dynamics in the 'negotiation arena'.[30]

Conceptualising ceasefire agreements as a locus where elements of statehood can be negotiated brings the literatures on statehood and ceasefires into closer alignment. The terms of a ceasefire agreement offer signatories the chance to formalise their bids for contested areas of control. But, on the ground (the negotiation arena), a multiplicity of other actors are also claiming the capacity to rule and dominate in contested areas.[31] These local dynamics may factor into the calculus of the parties negotiating an international ceasefire agreement or can also potentially muddy their ability to use ceasefires solely for their own benefit. As Paul Staniland has suggested, in messy civil war environments, bringing parties to the negotiating table is not all about negotiating an end to violence, or who wins or loses militarily.[32] Rather, ceasefire agreements are simultaneously both the formalised outcome of negotiations for power and authority (evidenced in the terms of the agreement) as well as a moment that interjects into ongoing contestations for power and authority by different actors on the ground.

Ceasefires can certainly also be an attempt by the parties at the negotiation table to move the conflict away from violence or to alter the use of violence (e.g. to exercise discipline; to stabilise control over territory/people; to ensure coherence within the ranks; or, in pursuit of ideological goals). But, in doing so, their aim is also to produce a wartime order that best serves a variety of other interests. Such a suggestion is not so controversial – most work on mediation is grounded in the rationalist tradition and the theory of negotiation costs and benefits.[33] The logic is that before entering into talks, disputants do an analysis of whether continued fighting is more advantageous than negotiation. My contention is that it is not only the fighting (or lack thereof) that disputants are focusing on. Rather, any and every area where benefit may arise from exercising control and authority is applied by actors to their cost-benefit calculation.

Rather than a bridge between war and peace, ceasefires create an emergent form of order that has the ability to influence the accumulation of power and authority by different actors. As such, what they contain and do potentially has an outsized effect on any future peace. This is most starkly illustrated in frozen conflicts like North Korea and Cyprus where the evolution of political and military systems is based on the formalisation of power and authority contained in the ceasefire agreement,[34] but the argument also holds true in much more dynamic and ongoing conflict environments. Ceasefires may create a platform for peace, but in doing so, they also clarify the landscape in terms of what are and what are not the important issues at stake for different competing parties. Taking this broader view of ceasefires, as types of wartime order, enables us to see more clearly which actors and what resources are valuable in civil war arenas and this, in turn, has implications for the negotiation and consequences of any eventual peace.

The Syrian de-escalation zones and statehood negotiation

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 as a wave of popular protests calling firstly for reform, and then eventually for the overthrow of the Assad regime, swept across the country. Eight years later the war was declared by the UN's Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein to be the 'worst man-made disaster since World War II'.[35] As the war progressed a variety of local, regional and international actors saw amid the ongoing violence opportunities to assert their own plans for dominance.[36] These included states such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran as well as local elites and non-state armed groups. Likewise, during this time, varied attempts were made by different actors towards a negotiated political solution. These have included both local level ceasefire negotiations[37] and international peace processes under the auspices of the Arab League, the United States, and the United Nations (the Geneva peace process) and the Russians (the Astana–Sochi peace process).

The case of how an internationally negotiated ceasefire that emerged from the Russian-led Astana peace process, known as de-escalation zones, provides a pertinent and contemporary example of the phenomenon of the negotiation of statehood through a ceasefire agreement.[38] This is firstly because the relationships and jostling for power and authority of a variety of actors were influenced by the ceasefire. These include the Syrian state, international actors like Russia and Turkey, local level militias, non-state armed groups, and Syrian citizens. Additionally, in-line with traditional understandings of ceasefires, the de-escalation zones were successful in decreasing violence initially.[39] However, the creation of the four territorially bounded ceasefire zones[40] did more than halt violence. The ceasefire agreement augmented the control of external actors, particularly Russia, over the diplomatic and security arena, Turkish control over the territory of northern Syria, and dovetailed with local reconciliation agreements with rebel groups to bring about the defection of opposition leaders, thereby consolidating the Syrian government's control over rebel populations but simultaneously empowering local pro-government militias that are potentially a threat to state control.

While a similar lens could be applied to ceasefires in other civil wars, this article necessarily focuses on a discrete number of ramifications of the Syrian de-escalation zones. Through cases such as Syria's, we are able to envisage a broader approach to conventional understandings about the impact ceasefires can have on attempts at conflict resolution by adding to debates about how ceasefires are implicated in emerging structures of authority and broader peace processes, as well as how power-structures are enforced, negotiated, and resisted at both the international and local levels. That said, it is also important not to overstate the influence of ceasefire agreements. While the de-escalation zones certainly assisted and changed the

relationships and power dynamics between certain players in Syria's war, agency is ever-present and likewise other military and political events can and do occur which have consequences for the same aspects of statehood I discuss below.

Diplomatic and security control

Russia's military involvement in the Syrian civil war began in September 2015, when, in order for the Syrian government to survive a tide of military victories that increasingly favoured the armed opposition, it invited Russia into the country to assist with its war effort. Russia's intervention succeeded in turning the military and political tides of the war. The retaking of Aleppo in December 2016, Syria's second-largest city and a key business hub, was crucial because it, 'set the stage for the current configuration of the peace process'.[41] As battlefield dynamics once again began to favour the Syrian government, the UN-led Geneva peace process also stalled. This was in large part due to the fact that its primary backer, the United States, had shifted its focus away from the Syrian opposition movement towards combatting the Islamic State in the east of the country. These diplomatic machinations at the international level coupled with Russia's dominance on the ground in Syria allowing it to assert control over both the military dynamics and the politics of the peace process. This manifested in the Astana–Sochi peace process. In effectively sidelining Geneva, 'Astana represents Russian pre-eminence in the Syrian conflict's political process'.[42] While being touted as complementary to Geneva, Astana changed the basic tenets of political negotiations. Rather than the ousting of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a pre-requisite for peace, 'Russia's political process for Syria has always been anchored to the Syrian state. It was never about negotiating regime change or a transitional government'.[43]

Despite talks being supposedly centred around the primacy of the Syrian government, the de-escalation zone agreement that emerged from the Astana peace process in May 2017 had ramifications for Syrian diplomacy and affected broader security dimensions of the civil war. This is because the Syrian government was neither a signatory to nor directly involved in negotiating the de-escalation zones.[44] Instead, Russia, Turkey, and Iran made the agreement on behalf of the Syrian government. These three external actors essentially negotiated and agreed to conditions that curtail Syrian diplomacy and its ability to influence events within its territory. Through a term relating to the establishment and functioning of checkpoints and observation posts on the perimeter of the de-escalation zones, Russia particularly has augmented the presence of its Military Police on the ground, allowing it a more granular level of control over local-level dynamics.

The Russian Military Police are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims from Russian states in the north Caucuses such as Ingushetia and Chechnya. Members of the Syrian armed opposition were reportedly surprised at seeing Sunni prayer rites being performed by the Russian Military Police on the road.[45] These very visual displays of religious solidarity proved successful in establishing a level of trust with opposition groups as the police were perceived by many armed groups as non-sectarian and therefore not as risky to deal with as the Syrian government or Iran.[46] As per the text of the ceasefire agreement, the Military Police operated checkpoints and observation posts on the permitters of the de-escalation zones, such as Dar al-Kabira in the Northern Homs de-escalation zone, around the southern zone and in the northern zone of Idlib. As such, the police were able to facilitate the flow of goods into de-escalation areas which also endeared them with local armed groups and populations. A member of the Russian military operating out of Hmeimen airbase in Latakia said that Russia, 'has good relations with non-state armed groups, in some cases better relations with them than the [Syrian] regime'.[47]

Broader level security control in Syria also now depends in some part on the commitment of the ceasefires three external signatories.[48] For example, Russia underwrites the Fifth Corps – an amalgam of local paramilitary groups, while the National Defense Forces come under Iranian leadership.[49] Likewise, many areas are now controlled by powerful militia figures that were 'constructed directly from the inner-sanctum of the Syrian regime'[50] but in many ways operating independently of it.[51] The most well known of these is the Tiger Forces, led by Airforce Intelligence Brigadier General Suheil al-Hasan[52] and the Desert Hawks led by brothers General Mohammad and Ayman Jaber. Until recently, the Jaber's neatly straddled the divide between regime loyalists, business elites with long-time interests in Syria's oil deposits and private militia leaders.[53] In 2013 they set up an armed group which acted as a security company to defend their oil trucks that essentially became more akin to a private army as the war progressed.[54]

One conflict analyst put it this way: 'I wouldn't call then warlords – more somewhere between warlords and gangsters'.[55] The implementation of the de-escalation zone facilitated the authority and control of many of these groups over certain geographical areas (mostly in the de-escalation areas) and meant the Syrian government has been unable to exercise hegemonic domination at the local level. This represents both a source of embarrassment for the Syrian government and a genuine threat, i.e. that these groups will eventually take up arms against the state.[56] As one analyst put it, 'You do not keep semi-hostile forces close if you have the means to destroy them'.[57] Because the government does not currently have the ability to reassert its own exclusive control over all the territory of the de-escalation areas or the material and financial resources needed to keep local level militia

commanders in check, it recognises that a way to prevent further large-scale insurrection is to turn a blind eye to local criminality and graft gleaned from local populations, particularly in the newly acquired de-escalation zones.[58] 'If you can't keep [militia] groups happy, you need to allow them to generate their own resources in criminal ways which make the population unhappy'.[59] As such, it appears that Assad's ability to control such groups in large part depends on his ability to pay fighters either out of his own pocket or from the pockets of Syrian citizens.[60]

In its efforts to survive, the Syrian government relinquished full authority and control of statehood in the diplomatic and security realms, arguably expecting that when the dynamics of the war had shifted more fully in its favour they would be returned.[61] While the control over Syrian statehood by other actors does not encompass the entirety of the state, certainly the Syrian government's ability to influence and control international diplomacy and local security dynamics has been impacted in fundamental ways by the de-escalation zone ceasefire agreement. The de-escalation zones have interacted with local dynamics to create a 'mosaic of security control' not limited to the Syrian state.[62] As the concept of a negotiation table that acts as a locus point for negotiating elements of statehood suggests, the de-escalation zone agreement converted the power configuration between the Syrian government and the ceasefire signatories into something more official and orderly. However, in spelling out the establishment of the de-escalation and security zones, checkpoints and observation posts administered by the ceasefire signatories, the ceasefire agreement codified a level of territorial and political control over Syrian statehood by external and non-state actors. To be clear, ambiguities and contestations existed in the Turkish/Russian/Iranian/Syrian relationship before the de-escalation zones – the de-escalation zones did not drive that process, which were the result of battleground dynamics and military necessity. But, the ceasefire formalised that framework and recalibrated statehood dynamics. Simply put, the ceasefire didn't necessarily change winners and losers but changed the distribution of power and authority.

Control over territory and citizenship

The de-escalation zone agreement and its subsequent dynamics effectively made 'Idlib [a province in northern Syria and one of the four designated de-escalation zones] a Turkish problem'.[63] The formalisation of the Idlib zone through the terms of the ceasefire dovetailed with local reconciliation agreements which brought the three other de-escalation areas back under Syrian control. The agreement also enabled a messy form of Turkish statehood over the northern Syrian province of Idlib by officialising Turkey's role in policing the non-state armed groups operating there.[64]

In the creation of the four de-escalation zones, Idlib became 'the dumping ground' for opposition fighters from the other three zones unwilling to be reconciled with the Syrian government.[65] These reconciliation deals (*itifaqaat al-musalaha*) go hand in hand with the internationally negotiated ceasefire.[66] The local deals come in two broad types – 'hard' and 'soft'[67] but 'the template is not rocket science. The strong party tells the weaker ones you can either die here or surrender'.[68] While they are both more akin to a forced surrender than any sort of negotiated settlement, the type can have different ramifications for individuals and communities.[69] Overall, however, whether in the short or longer term, the primary aim of these local agreements has been to gain control over territory and certain Syrian citizens.

The reconciliation process for three of the four de-escalation zones was completed between March and July 2018.[70] As of the beginning of 2019 when this article was written, only the Idlib zone remains. 'There was a meaningful demonstration effect in the sequencing of the areas that fell', said a conflict analyst I interviewed who is based in Beirut.[71] The Eastern Ghouta zone was the first to surrender to the Syrian government in March 2018. However, the fall of 'Ghouta had an outsized psychological impact' on the opposition in the other zones.[72] While there may have been an initial decrease in violence across the de-escalation zones, the Syrian government's subsequent siege, bombardment, alleged use of chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta coupled with the lack-lustre international response 'was clarifying in terms of how far international "friends" would be prepared to go for other [de-escalation] areas'.[73] The answer was not far.

This meant that after Ghouta agreed to a reconciliation deal, rebel leaders in the remaining zones were left in a difficult position. Making a soft reconciliation deal with the government notionally meant survival. The opposition leaders and their cadres would be subsumed into the Fifth Corps (a pro-government army division consisting of volunteers mainly from reconciled areas organised by Russia)[74] and would therefore have the ability to remain in the local area in order to defend and represent family and local constituents. While this could mean being branded as power-hungry opportunists (*difda'* or 'frogs' in local parlance), for many it seemed like a preferable option to their communities being left to the whims of untrustworthy outsiders.[75] Alternatively, a hard reconciliation meant certain displacement to the Idlib de-escalation zone, 'being yanked from family and home, becoming a Turkish mercenary, being gobbled up by jihadists or living in a really awful IDP camp'.[76]

Unsurprisingly given the stakes, many rebel leaders were quick to jump ship for both self-serving and more noble reasons. Ahmad al-Awdeh, leader of the opposition's Shabab a-Sunnah faction, became one of the earliest to capitulate to a soft reconciliation deal in the southern de-escalation zone and went on to become a Fifth Corps volunteer in the eastern Dara'a countryside, where he was from.[77] Likewise, Omar Melhem, a former colonel in the Syrian

army-cum-rebel commander from Talbiseh in the northern Homs zone, surrendered to the government in order to be allowed to stay in his hometown rather than being exiled to Idlib.[78] Other notable individuals such as Sufi preacher Bassam Difdaa from Eastern Ghouta seem to have joined the opposition movement at the outset of the uprisings but took the opportunity to change allegiances back to the government once reconciliation became more likely by virtue of the de-escalation zones.[79]

Nevertheless, as with the mortgaged control over aspects of diplomacy and security, soft reconciliations are envisaged by the Syrian government to be temporary – 'it is not something the regime will tolerate in the long-term'.[80] Already, government transgressions of the terms of reconciliation agreements are prevalent.[81] For example, rebel leaders in some soft reconciled areas were sent to fight for the Syrian government in other areas anyway when they failed to provide more volunteers for the Fifth Corps.[82] Some have even been disappeared or executed despite the deals purportedly giving them the opportunity to transition to life back under government control without penalty.[83] Likewise, life in all reconciled areas remains highly securitised. Service provision remains minimal, men are banned from leaving the area and some are being told by the government that they now have to pay taxes dating back to 2011, the start of the uprising.[84]

The existence of the Idlib zone allowed de-escalation and reconciliation in the other three areas to be so effective. The Idlib zone is therefore different in character from the other three areas not only because the non-state armed groups are much stronger but also because of Turkey's role, under the auspices of the ceasefire agreement, in policing the two largest rebel groups operating there, the Syrian National Army and one-time al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Ankara has taken on this role for a variety of reasons. In large part it is to control the flow of refugees over the border it shares with Idlib; to limit the activities of jihadi actors on its own soil; and, to control what it perceives as the Kurdish threat.[85]

Over the Syrian National Army, an amalgamation of various opposition armed groups, Turkey has full control. 'They [the Syrian National Army] are too dependent on Turkey to abandon the agreement Turkey made [about the de-escalation zone]'.[86] In practice this means paying the salaries of fighters, providing material support (i.e. equipment and logistics) and controlling access into and out of Turkey for commanders and family members in what has effectively become their rear-base.[87] While there have been more recent changes, up until the end of 2018, they seemed to operate in a traditional proxy relationship offering Turkey relatively free rein in Idlib.[88] As one conflict researcher based in France put it, 'Turkey is the only reason rebels still control any of Syria'.[89]

What makes Turkey's complete control over Idlib messy is the ongoing presence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. This is because Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is less dependent on Turkey, allegedly receiving support from Saudi Arabia and

Qatar, but also because the nature of the relationship is less well delineated.[90] There is some cooperation (e.g. Turkish troops can pass through areas controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) but it is more like 'negotiation with a dagger behind the back'.[91] The ceasefire agreement tasked Turkey with separating and demilitarising jihadists like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib from supposedly more moderate elements like the Syrian National Army. While since July 2017 the two groups have had more discrete territorial control in Idlib, in practice it remains a difficult proposition for a state that supposedly has little appetite for a military confrontation to disarm a powerful non-state armed group in a non-coercive way.[92] While Turkey potentially 'has more control over Hayat Tahrir al-Sham than it will admit',[93] it does have communication channels that remain largely based around notifications and ultimatums making it difficult for the two to come to any sort of larger arrangements around who controls what.[94] Essentially, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham controls the Idlib territory but it operates within a Turkish-led order and struggles to maintain full autonomy.[95] A conflict analyst I interviewed added that 'to an extent this is true for every armed group in Syria, but in this case it's very clear'.[96]

While other conflict dynamics are also no doubt implicated, the creation of the de-escalation zones has essentially contributed to the redistribution of Syrian territorial control and gone hand in hand with the reconciliation strategy at the local level which necessitated that the Idlib zone is reserved for those the Syrian government considers undesirable. From the perspective of its international signatories, the confluence of the de-escalation zones with local reconciliation agreements achieved their goal of 'isolating the terrorist, jihadi problem in one pocket'.[97] For more local level actors such as the various smaller armed opposition groups, the creation of the de-escalation zones offered a way to capitulate without dying or relocate if they were unable, ideologically or practically, to reconcile with the Syrian state. It also offered local elites-cum-militia leaders a way of augmenting their authority and control over the spoils of newly-reconciled areas.

Ceasefire agreements as locus of statehood negotiation

This paper aims to broaden our understanding of how ceasefire negotiations not only relate to military dynamics but how they may influence elements of statehood. Suggesting that actors use ceasefires to advance their own positions and/or settle their own military conflicts is unremarkable. However, what is a value-add to existing knowledge is better interrogating how decisions relating to wars 'master' cleavages, such as international ceasefire negotiations, affect the local level[98] and likewise, how ceasefires can be conceptualised as types of wartime order that have the ability to recalibrate control and authority. The Syrian case discussed above shows how the de-escalation zones not only affected the use of

violence but became a locus for negotiating different aspects of statehood such as diplomacy, security, territory, and citizenship.

It is certainly possible that the creation of the de-escalation zones and their associated dynamics did not change the ultimate trajectory of the Syrian war. Even if the zones enabled some recognition of aspiring sovereigns, in realpolitik terms, the ceasefire was merely a prelude to the Assad government and its allies retaking control over most of the country. An argument can be made that the ceasefire was used cynically to successfully advance the aims of the wars' most powerful players. But, I believe that high politics and military craft are not the only salient dynamics of civil wars. The analysis offered above shows that what ceasefires contain (i.e. their text) and the actions they spawn on the ground can have very real effects on who are (or who become) the major players in the post-war environment, and likewise, who has been excluded and may potentially be in need of additional assistance and oversight.

Taking the microdynamics that ceasefires can generate into account has two main practical ramifications. The first is to show that remaining fixated on measuring the success of ceasefires by how they are able to halt violence or as a political platform for peace, blinds us to a wide range of other consequences ceasefires generate. Understanding how ceasefires can influence a range of contested areas of statehood such as relationships between 'sovereign aspirants',[99] power-grabs for important state resources and conflict dynamics means that we are better able to conceptualise their potential and hopefully understand their results. Pragmatically, this means that during peace-building activities, such as security sector reform, property reconstruction efforts, refugee returns, or constitution drafting, post-conflict planners can understand more about the nature of, and relationships between, actors that are likely to wield authority. Therefore, the making of any truly inclusive peace may have its roots not just in the peace agreement, but in the ceasefire that likely preceded it.

The corollary is that through the analysis of how the Astana de-escalation zones affected statehood dynamics in Syria we can begin to comprehend the myriad institutions, practices, and actors involved in asserting power and authority not only during times of violence in civil war but also during notional times of order, such as ceasefires. While many of these processes were happening prior to Astana, the creation of the de-escalation zones was not only the 'formalisation of the strategic reality on the ground'.[100] Instead, they interjected into these realities, altering and recalibrating the relationships between nodes and networks of power. While 'not everything is or can be negotiated and not everyone takes part in negotiating statehood',[101] nevertheless, the results of diplomatic processes, including ceasefires, can be seen as one means by which powerful groups try to exercise domination over weaker ones at varying levels of analysis.[102]

As the Syrian case shows, the de-escalation zones may have lowered kinetic activity but they also enabled the recalibration of power and authority in

numerous other areas of contested statehood. These included the strategic implementation of a military and political strategy aimed at both recapturing territory and subsuming former opposition leaders and citizens back into the state as forced 'collaborators'[103]; empowered militia leaders as aspiring sovereigns; simultaneously allowed for the Syrian government to assert greater control over certain territorial areas while denying it in others; and allowed for personal interactions between Russian Military Police and rebels to occur thereby augmenting Russian control of the security space. Overall, in civil wars such as Syria's, the negotiation of international ceasefires brings to the fore jostling and machinations for authority by different players and can act as a nexus to show how international and local levels feedback on one another, potentially affecting subsequent negotiations or any eventual peace.

Notes

1. See e.g. Podder, "Understanding the Legitimacy of Armed Groups"; Polese and Santini, "Limited Statehood and Its Security Implications on the Fragmentation Political Order in the Middle East and North Africa".
2. Doyle and Dunning, "Recognizing Fragmented Authority."; Hinnebusch, "From Westphalian Failure to Heterarchic Governance in MENA."
3. Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly, *Rebel Governance in Civil War*; Wehrey, "Armies, Militias and (Re)-Integration in Fractures States."
4. Caspersen, "Degrees of Legitimacy."
5. Metelits, *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behaviour*.
6. von Benda-Beckmann and Pirie, "Order and Disorder"; Kalyvas, Shapiro and Masoud, *Order, Conflict, and Violence*.
7. Arjona, *Wartime Institutions: A Research Agenda*; Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders."
8. Hagmann and Peclard, "Negotiating Statehood."
9. Ibid, 543; Migdal and Schlichte, "Rethinking the State," 14–5.
10. Chounet-Cambas, *Negotiating Ceasefires*, 6.
11. Sosnowski, *Ceasefires as Statebuilding*; Staniland, "Armed Politics and the Study of Intrastate Conflict."
12. Chounet-Cambas, *Ceasefires*; Fortna, "Scraps of Paper? Agreements and the Durability of Peace."
13. Åkebo, *The Politics of Ceasefires: On Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes in Aceh and Sri Lanka*.
14. Harrisson and Kyed, "Ceasefire State-Making and Justice Provision by Ethnic Armed Groups in Southeast Myanmar"; Kolås, "Naga militancy and violent politics in the shadow of ceasefire"; Sosnowski, "Violence and Order"; Woods, "Ceasefire Capitalism."
15. Lund, "Rule and Rupture."
16. Ibid.
17. Sosnowski, *Ceasefires as Statebuilding*.
18. The identity of all interviewees has been kept anonymous due to the nature of my ethics clearance and the sensitivity of the subject matter.

19. Hagmann and Péclard, "Negotiating Statehood"; Lund, "Twilight Institutions."
20. Lund, "Twilight Institutions: Public Authority and Local Politics in Africa."
21. Hagmann and Péclard, "Negotiating Statehood."
22. Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, and Vlassenroot, "State and Non-State Regulation in African Protracted Crises."
23. See note 15 above.
24. See note 14 above.
25. Ceasefire negotiator Luc Chounet-Cambas' definition of a ceasefire highlights the outcome of a ceasefire is a termination in fighting. Similarly, Virginia Page Fortna sees ceasefires as 'an end to or break in the fighting, whether or not it represents the final end of the war' and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program considers a 'ceasefire agreement' to be one of four possible ways that a conflict can be terminated.
26. See note 13 above.
27. Kolås, "Naga Militancy and Violent Politics in the Shadow of Ceasefire."
28. Haysom and Hottinger, "Do's and Don'ts of Sustainable Ceasefire Agreements", 13; Mac Ginty, "No War, No Peace," 151.
29. Stedman, Rothchild, and Cousens, *Ending Civil Wars*, 12.
30. See note 21 above.
31. See note 20 above.
32. Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders."
33. See e.g. Ruhe, "Anticipating Mediated Talks: Predicting the Timing of Mediation with Disaggregated Conflict Dynamics"; Wallensteen and Svensson, "Talking Peace: International Mediation in Armed Conflicts"; Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments."
34. Isabelle Duyvesteyn, "Exploring the Utility of Force," 432.
35. Collins, "Syria's war: Worst man-made disaster since World War II."
36. Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*; Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami, *Burning Country*.
37. Hassan, "*Hope Springs in Syria?*"; Sosnowski, "Ceasefires as violent statebuilding."
38. Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Arab Republic, 6 May 2017.
39. Dalay, "From Astana to Sochi: How de-escalation allowed Assad to return to war."
40. One zone was in the south-west around Dara'a and Quinetra; one in Eastern Ghouta; one in Northern Homs; and, one in Idlib. There is also some debate as to whether all four zones technically come under the auspices of the Astana peace process. This was seen most prominently in the US-backed zone in the south. My purpose in this article is to study the ramifications of the creation of the zones therefore it is not wholly necessary to delve too much deeper into the disputes and specificities around the geo-politics.
41. Interview 6: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Germany, 20 November 2018.
42. Interview 2: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Germany, 4 September 2018.
43. Ibid. 2018.
44. Interview 7: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Moscow, Russia, 4 December 2018.
45. Interview 4: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Tbilisi, Georgia, 7 November 2018; Interview 5: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Washington D.C., 13 November 2018.
46. Interview 4: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Tbilisi, Georgia, 7 November 2018.

47. As told to a conflict analyst in an exchange with a Russian personnel working out of Hmeimen, Interview 6: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Germany, 20 November 2018.
48. Interview 3: Skype interview with conflict researcher, France, 25 October 2018.
49. Alami, "Syria seeks to integrate myriad paramilitaries."
50. Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019; al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution*, 45–64.
51. Interview 1: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 28 August 2018; Schneckener, "Militias and the Politics of Legitimacy."
52. Waters, "The Tiger Forces: Pro-Assad Fighters Backed by Russia."
53. Winter, "Syria's Desert Hawks and the Loyalist Response to ISIS."
54. Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019.
55. See note 48 above, 2018.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Heydemann, *Beyond Fragility*; Leenders and Giustozzi, "Outsourcing State Violence."
59. See note 48 above, 2018.
60. Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019.
61. Interview 5: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Washington D.C., 13 November 2018; Khaddour, *Survival through Destruction*.
62. Interview 1: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon 28 August 2018.
63. Interview 6: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Germany, 20 November 2018; Interview 7: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Moscow, Russia, 4 December 2018.
64. Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area.
65. Interview 4: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Tbilisi, Georgia, 7 November 2018.
66. Interview 7: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Moscow, Russia, 4 December 2018.
67. Mercy Corps Humanitarian Access Team, *Local Reconciliations in Syria: Impact on Humanitarian Implementers, Humanitarian Aid Provision, and Community Needs*, 5–6; Interview 1: Skype interview with conflict researcher, Beirut, Lebanon, 28 August 2018.
68. Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019.
69. Khaled a-Noufal and Clark, "Like a big prison: Months into reconciliation, invisible borders still divide Syria's southwest"; Sosnowski," Reconciliation agreements as strangle contract."
70. See note 48 above, 2018.
71. Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018.
72. Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018; Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019.
73. Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018.

74. See note 49 above.
75. Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018.
76. Ibid.
77. Hamidi, "Syria's Southern Factions Split After Busra 'Settlement'."
78. Mrouhe, "Under Assad's group, uneasy co-existence with Syria ex-rebels."
79. See note 48 above, 2018.
80. Ibid.
81. Khaled a-Noufal and Clark, "Life after reconciliation marred by arrests, broken promises as Syria's southwest returns to government control."
82. Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018.
83. Khaled a-Noufal and Clark, "We don't even know if he's alive."
84. Mrouhe, "Under Assad's group, uneasy co-existence with Syria ex-rebels."
85. Interview 3: Skype interview with conflict researcher, France, 25 October 2018; Interview 5: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Washington D.C., 13 November 2018.
86. See note 48 above, 2018.
87. Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018.
88. Interview 3: Skype interview with conflict researcher, France, 25 October 2018; Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019; Haid, "Turkey's Gradual Efforts to Professionalize Syrian Allies."
89. See note 48 above, 2018.
90. Interview 3: Skype interview with conflict researcher, France, 25 October 2018; Interview 4: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Tbilisi, Georgia, 7 November 2018.
91. See note 48 above, 2018.
92. Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018.
93. Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019.
94. Interview 7: Skype interview with conflict analyst, Moscow, Russia, 4 December 2018; Interview 8: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Beirut, Lebanon, 13 December 2018.
95. Interview 9: WhatsApp audio interview with conflict analyst, Sweden, 15 January 2019.
96. Ibid.
97. See note 63 above, 2018.
98. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*.
99. Klem and Maunaguru, "Public Authority under Sovereign Encroachment."
100. See note 42 above, 2018.
101. Hagmann and Peclard, "Negotiating Statehood," 545.
102. Schlichte, "The Limits of Armed Contestation."
103. See note 98 above.

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