

Syria in Transition



Issue 15 – August 2024

Welcome to Syria in Transition (SiT), a monthly delve into policy-relevant developments concerning the Syrian conflict. Crafted by practitioners with a decade-long experience in the field, SiT offers informed perspectives tailored for diplomats and decision makers. SiT goes straight to the point and shuns unnecessary verbiage – just as we would prefer as avid readers ourselves.

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Regime in transition

How Assad is embracing change to maintain the status quo

The word “transition” has never been welcomed in Damascus as it is synonymous with “regime change.” The Russians suppressed its use in the drafting process of UNSCR 2254, and the UN Special Envoy has studiously kept it in his banished words list. Recently, however, the word has regained some popularity in the Syrian capital, with none other than Bashar Assad leading the way in its renewed use. After the 15 July parliamentary elections Assad declared: *“The conflict [in Syria] had been a military conflict and a constitutional conflict. It was about preserving the constitution that represents the essence of the state. Now this issue is behind us. Today, we are in a transitional phase that is linked to visions regarding the role of the state and its institutions, policies, and orientation.”* Concurrent with this statement has come change in the security and military institutions, the Baath Party, and in state-owned companies. Cumulatively, these changes point to what Assad is ready to offer the Arabs by way of ‘reforms.’ It’s not a transition in the proper sense; but neither is it fully cosmetic.

Mukhabarat re-brand

In January 2024 Syrian state media announced changes in the senior leadership of the security agencies. Major-General Ali Mamlouk was removed from his position as head of the National Security Office, with Major-General Kifah Malhem appointed as his successor. Malhem possesses all the credentials required for the role, being one of the most senior intelligence officers and a longtime friend of Basel, Bashar’s older brother who died in 1994. He is also an Alawite and belongs to the same *Kalbiya* clan as the Assads.

Soon after, Assad chaired a high-level meeting where a new security policy was announced. According to

the official press release, the meeting concerned, *“the anticipated impact of the ongoing restructuring in the security field and improving coordination between the agencies, with the development of a security roadmap based on strategic visions that address international, regional, and internal challenges and risks.”*

Later, in March, several reports emerged indicating that Malhem had ordered a merger of Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence into an entity named “Army and Armed Forces Intelligence.” Sources in Damascus, however, have confirmed that the merger has not yet officially occurred but was still under consideration. A presidential decree at the end of March appointing Major-General Kamel Hassan as head of Military Intelligence, a position he had previously held on an acting basis, provided additional evidence that the merger had not been effected. State Security and Political Security have not yet been touched by the leadership changes but announcements are likely later in the year.

In itself, restructuring the security agencies does not amount to reform. It is doubtful that the human rights situation will improve, or that these agencies will ever be held accountable before the law. Leading Syria’s security sector for the next four to five years will be officers who have all committed heinous crimes and are subject to Western sanctions. At the same time, the regime will very likely continue to face the same inefficiencies that have beset these agencies from their inception, arising from inter-agency rivalry, poor personnel training, and outdated technology.

The changes in the personnel and structure of the security agencies is believed to have been in response to a request by Riyadh, which wants to see sufficient reforms to warrant better relations and financial support. With the same objective, the regime also announced the dissolution of military field courts and an end to civilians being tried before military courts. The regime will of course not allow the Saudis to dictate the timing or scale of the restructuring, and any new security policy will require years to roll out, and will most certainly fall short of accepted definitions of security sector reform. The future of the Fourth Division, led by Assad’s brother Maher, is said to be under discussion with the Saudis. It remains the most powerful Syrian security actor of all, and its fate will be a useful barometer of the extent of change that the Assads are willing to countenance.

Army goes professional

Parallel to these security agency developments, the regime has made several significant changes to the army. These include some personnel changes but also an overhaul of the recruitment process and of reserve service, and various legislative decrees on conscription and the professionalisation of the army.

In March 2024 Assad issued an extensive list of new appointments to the General Staff and to division and brigade leadership. Notably, Major-General Zuhair Assad was removed from command of the Second Corps, and Major-General Suheil al-Hassan was appointed to lead the Special Forces. Al-Hassan is very close to the Assads, having attended the same Alawite religious seminary as Bashar, to whom he is tied by an oath of brotherhood.

Al-Hassan’s appointment is also largely due to his “counter-terrorism” experience gained at Air Force Intelligence, and later in transforming the Tiger Forces militia into the 25th Special Missions Division. He is believed to be the right person to rebuild the Special Forces brigades, which have suffered significant losses during years of grinding urban combat. In so doing he will likely benefit from Russian support, and the Special Forces will likely become a key regime protection force, alongside the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division.

The sectarian composition of the army remains, however, a significant obstacle to genuine reform. Of the 24 senior officers promoted, 92 per cent were Alawites – reflecting a continuation of a policy initiated by Hafiz Assad of relying on sect and loyalty rather than competence as the fundamental criterion for promotion in the military. Assad is unlikely to see this as much of a problem.

In June, meanwhile, the regime announced a plan to gradually end reserve service. Soldiers will be discharged after completing six years, then five, then four, gradually decreasing the period until it reaches two years by the end of 2025. The conscription period, however, remains unchanged at 18 months. A leaked government document said that 152,000 soldiers would be discharged from reserve service by the end of 2025 – a figure contrasting sharply with previous estimates that suggested a severe military manpower shortage.

The regime has also launched a plan to transition to an all-volunteer professional army. This began in earnest with several administrative orders that ended the reserve service of certain categories of enlisted men. Simultaneously, the army announced new recruitment contracts of five and ten years that exempted those that signed up from conscription. Significant benefits were offered to the new volunteers such as higher salaries and bonuses – such that these contracts now rival those offered by IRGC-backed militias. This might be interpreted in Arab capitals as the regime weakening Iran's influence by absorbing militia personnel into the formal army. The flip side is that veteran IRGC militiamen are likely to form a significant bloc in the new professional army.

The regime also spoke about “redefining” the concept of compulsory service altogether, raising a potential for its complete abolition. Such a step will not materialise for several years yet, however, and it remains questionable whether the regime will be able fully to dispense with conscription, which is a major tool of social disciplining. Although the effectiveness of Syria's conscript army has often been called into question (“flip flop army,” etc.), transitioning to an all-volunteer force would render the regime reliant almost exclusively on a human resource pool that had proved its effectiveness in the war against the opposition. This new army would be more sectarian, not less.

New Baath

At its general conference in early May the Baath Party re-elected Assad as Secretary-General. It also elected a new Central Committee and expanded its number of seats from 80 to 125 – 45 of which are reserved for Assad appointees. Significant figures like Ali Mamoulouk, Bouthaina Shaaban, and Luna al-Shibl (before her death) were dropped. The Central Leadership (the politburo) underwent a more extensive clear-out, with an entirely new line up of party apparatchiks being promoted, the majority from relative obscurity. The conference was said to be a starting point for the “reformation” and “repositioning” of the party that Assad has often spoken about.

Soon after the purge, the People's Assembly elections were held, on 15 July. These were conducted under “international supervision,” with the regime claiming they were “the first of [their] kind in Syrian history.” With a turnout that did not exceed 45 per cent, the Baath Party and its allies won about 70 per cent of seats. The elections were soon followed by a bevy of

legislative changes. In a 23 July meeting Assad made clear that the new People's Assembly would address many vital issues, adding that “the elections reflected the will of the Syrian people and their desire to participate in the new phase, a phase of work and rebuilding.”

Historically, in terms of wielding effective power, the Baath Party has been the junior partner to the army and security agencies. Nevertheless, it has proved itself as a useful instrument to co-opt and organise elites. Going forward, the new leadership of the party will be expected to embrace free market reforms and demonstrate enthusiasm for anti-corruption drives. Should Assad face the prospect of having to conduct real legislative elections – to ratify a new constitution perhaps – a fresher and more effective Baath Party will be needed.

State sell-off

The regime has also been busy renovating the administrative state. Since early 2024, it has issued 46 legislative texts (20 decrees and 26 laws) – more than double the number in the same period of 2023.

Entirely new bodies created since the start of 2024 have included a General Authority for Managing State Property, a National Authority for Information Technology Services, an Earthquake Victims Support Fund, and a Student Loan Fund. Additionally, new bodies have been created to replace old ones, such as the General Secretariat of the Presidency, the Ministry of Information, Communications, and Technology and the Blood Transfusion Foundation.

Further, since early 2024 several public companies have been merged. The new entities include the General Company for Cement and Building Materials Production and Marketing – Omran, the General Company for Textile Industries and the General Company for Food Industries.

Laws and regulations on the governance and management of joint-stock and public companies have meanwhile been overhauled, possibly as the prelude to future large-scale privatisation, given the current financial difficulties facing state-owned enterprises and the need to repay \$50 billion of debts to Iran. Any such sell-off of state assets would give Gulf Arabs investment opportunities in the post-conflict economy. Sanctions notwithstanding, a sell-off of the energy, construction, and light manufacturing sectors might attract the kind of Gulf investor that Assad des-

perately needs. With privatisation would come a new Riyadh- and Abu Dhabi-facing Syrian business elite that would lend the dictator a degree of Sunni Arab legitimacy.

Déjà vu

Under pressure from Saudi Arabia to deliver on change, the regime has initiated an overhaul of the tools it uses to control the state. Beyond making the regime more efficient, the changes (announced or actual) are meant to appeal to an “Arab solution” to the Syria crisis: one that is likely to prioritise economic opportunities and leave core regime interests intact.

Assad’s concept of “transition” is all about shifting from “counter-terrorism” (i.e. survival) to building Regime 2.0. The key means to that objective will be to re-position the state strategically so that it can take maximum advantage of anticipated Gulf investment and UN early recovery funding. The changes do not signal any systemic change in the regime’s behaviour. They do not address core opposition demands; and they do not provide a political solution aligned with the vision of UNSCR 2254.

The most consequential effects of Assad’s transition will be the end of old networks and figures that once symbolised the regime. In the coming years, those associated with the conflict will disappear entirely, and a new post-conflict elite will emerge that will share the spoils of the reconstruction bonanza. This is likely to include a cohort of Gulf-associated businessmen who will dominate the privatised economy while Assad retains tight control over all political and security matters. It’s a sort of transition, and some may well market it as progress. Absent genuine multi-party politics and real security sector reform, however, it will be a transition to something depressingly familiar.

Highway to the danger zone

Italy’s Syria initiative carries risks for the EU

On 15 July the Foreign Ministers of Italy, Austria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, and Slovakia sent a letter to High Representative Josep Borrell calling for a reassessment of the EU’s Syria strategy. The declared goals were to increase European political leverage, enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts, and create conditions for refugee return. Alongside this letter, they presented a non-paper intended as input for an open discussion but clearly hinting at their real goals: higher-level diplomatic engagement with the Assad regime, comprehensive early recovery assistance shielded from political risk analysis, and sanctions relief. Conditionality was conspicuously absent. These demands, primarily aimed at a domestic audience, are not new. What is novel is the activation of formal EU channels to push for them. The issue was brought up in the EU Foreign Affairs Committee on 22 July under ‘any other business’, and the External Action Service is expected to prepare input for the next meeting on 12 September.

To leave no doubt on who is taking ownership of the initiative, the Italian and Austrian foreign ministers published a joint statement on 22 July setting a commendable benchmark for EU policy: *“Any further action obviously cannot and must not imply any compromise on the basic principles of democracy, inclusiveness, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. To this end, however, it is urgent to relaunch a substantial and meaningful dialogue between the current rulers in Damascus and the opposition, within the framework of the political process led by UN Special Envoy Pedersen. We therefore urge Assad to show the necessary flexibility in a reconciliation process that is needed to get Syria back on track.”*

The Italian initiative’s suggested course of action, however, contradicts every one of the principles outlined in the Italian-Austrian statement. Urging Assad to show flexibility while granting him political legitimacy, small-scale reconstruction, and sanctions relief for free makes little sense. The non-paper contains numerous other anomalies. It suggests appointing a European Envoy and reciprocity in representa-

tion; but an EU Envoy at ambassador level would mean upgrading Syrian diplomatic representation in Brussels: another freebie for Assad for nothing gained. It calls for the abandonment of a key principle of EU strategy: that there “can be no lasting peace in Syria under the current regime.” This is not a position that can be replaced by a “realistic” approach, as the initiative suggests. It is a sober analysis that has withstood the test of time. Opinions may vary on the pros and cons of different levels of diplomatic engagement, but assuming that lasting peace with the Assad regime in place is somehow possible is either poor analysis or ideologically blinkered; or both. A fundamental flaw in the initiative is that the Syrian opposition is entirely sidelined.

Another significant gap in the initiative is how it intends to square humanitarian and political goals. It says that it aims to translate the EU’s humanitarian efforts into a “correspondent political role,” while also arguing that both refugee return and early recovery assistance are humanitarian issues that shouldn’t be politicised. The reality is that refugee return will only be achieved through a political solution, and careless early recovery approaches will lift the enabling of the Assad regime – with Western aid – to a whole new level. What is needed – and what is ignored by the non-paper – are proper risk analysis and useful political frameworks for early recovery – which the UN has yet to present to Syrians and donor governments.

To justify the need for a changed approach, the Italian initiative repeatedly cites the normalisation of some Arab states. It doesn’t note, however, that this failed to achieve any Arab goals, such as ending drug trafficking and progress on refugee returns; and that this led the Arab Contact Group’s meetings to halt in May 2024.

With the Pope’s blessing

Interviewed by Austrian television on 28 July, Foreign Minister Schallenberg – who claims much credit for the initiative – struggled to explain how unconditional engagement with the Assad regime could work. Instead, he deflected the question by asserting that the initiative was only about an open discussion on how to “make things better.” The project’s real driver are the Italians, who promoted Special Envoy Stefano Ravagnan to Ambassador in late July. Ravagnan is a long-time advocate of a political opening towards Damascus and creating stability through cooperation with regime-controlled state institutions.

The Austrian-Italian position aligns neatly with the Vatican’s stance, which has significant influence on Italy’s political establishment. The Vatican, typically acting discreetly, has criticised Western interventionist policies and advocated against military action after the Ghouta chemical attacks of 2013. Cardinal Mario Zenari, the Apostolic Nuncio to Syria, has openly advocated against Western intervention and called for sanctions relief and reconstruction. While the Vatican warns against spiraling violence, it supports the Assad regime, seeing it as the best bet for a stable Syrian state that can protect the Christian minority. Catholic organisations such as Sant’Egidio that operate extensively in Syria share such policies. Multiple sources have confirmed that the Vatican played a strong role in lobbying for the Italian initiative in the US and in Europe.

No conditionality, no negotiations

The Italian initiative’s purported goal of supporting the UN Special Envoy in advancing UNSCR 2254 is ironic given that its suggestions would strip the EU of any leverage to support a Syrian-led process of reciprocal concessions. Without conditionality, there won’t be negotiations. Rather, the Assad regime would use its diplomatic upgrade further to exhaust regional and international governments and to crowd out the Syrian opposition from formal politics, effectively killing off UNSCR 2254.

A “strong-man deal” like those the EU pursues with autocrats in North Africa will not succeed in Syria. Assad is already incapable of effectively governing areas under his control. He would be even more impotent dealing with millions of opposition-aligned Syrians in other parts of the country and abroad – something that he anyway has no wish to attempt.

The Italian initiative’s core inconsistency lies in the misconception that a new approach can be justified by simply claiming that past efforts have failed and that anything new is better than what went before. It offers no rationale for why the new approach might work. Perhaps the project is merely a reflection of the right-wing Meloni government’s eagerness to pursue refugee return at any cost – or at least create the impression for its domestic constituency that it is doing something on that front. Given Arab normalisation, perhaps there is also a degree of FOMO by Italian diplomats who speculate that something interesting might be brewing in Damascus and that they could

be the EU's eyes and ears on the ground. Commercial interest may also be at play, as was suggested by diplomatic sources.

Decision-makers in Brussels might not be able to tell Italy what to do, but they should be cognisant of the importance of a principled EU position. A re-think driven by populism would inflame divisions in the EU (and with the US) when Western unity is needed. The EU's principled commitment to Syria has been a commendable hallmark of EU policy that has given it clout in international discussions on Syria. Lowering the bar now risks giving away what little leverage the EU has. That doesn't mean that tweaking EU policy isn't necessary, but for that the EU should instead direct its energies to promoting realistic confidence-building measures *between the Syrian parties* that makes life for Syrian civilians less intolerable. Positive engagement from Damascus on this type of CBMs would be a benchmark for the sort of good-faith engagement that could possibly justify reconsidering the 'three noes' policy. Anything else is blind actionism that Europeans should resist.

The fight goes on

A conversation with
Badr Jamous

The Syrian Negotiation Commission (SNC) – the negotiating arm of the Syrian opposition – recently amended its by-laws, extending the term of the presidency from one to two years. This allowed the re-election of Badr Jamous as President; but the amendment sparked accusations of undemocratic practices. It also came amid a stalled political process, continuing Arab normalisation, and growing calls in Europe for direct engagement with the Assad regime. To learn more about how the SNC plans to meet these challenges, *Syria in Transition* spoke with Dr Jamous.

You have been given a renewed mandate as the head of the SNC after the members voted to amend the by-laws to allow you to stay on. What were the reasons for this change?

Jamous: First and foremost, it's important to clarify that the SNC is not a government entity and does not possess executive tools like a government. Viewing its by-laws as being akin to a constitution would be a mistake. The SNC is a specialised body with one goal: to negotiate a political solution on behalf of the opposition. The rationale behind changing the by-laws was to keep pace with events.

At the outset of the revolution, our focus was always on the near and medium term. We did not expect the crisis to last for that many years. Over time, it became clear to the various components of the SNC that one-year leadership terms were impractical. Effective leadership requires time to build international relationships and implement strategies, which in democratic systems typically takes several years. After extensive discussions and deliberations, we concluded that leadership terms should be extended to at least two years, and the SNC members voted to amend the by-laws accordingly. The extension of my tenure can be seen as a vote of confidence in the SNC's efforts and accomplishments, both within Syrian communities and with the international community.

What is your plan for the coming year?

Jamous: It will be all about revitalising the role of the opposition and restoring the agency of Syrians in shaping the conflict's outcome. We have established strong relationships with Syrian communities and civ-

il society, research centres, business associations, and other interest groups. My aim is to transform the SNC into an even more credible and inclusive body, one that is supported by all segments of the Syrian population. This will enable us to present a united negotiating front with both external actors and the regime in Damascus to find a fair and just solution for the Syrian people.

Given the growing trend of normalisation with Assad and the stagnation in the political process, is there a risk that the SNC could become irrelevant?

Jamous: On the contrary. We view the normalisation efforts by some governments as temporary measures aimed at alleviating the immediate fallout of the conflict bilaterally. It is becoming increasingly evident that these efforts are not a sustainable solution to the Syrian crisis. Without a comprehensive political resolution, Syria will remain fragmented under multiple spheres of influence.

Many countries are beginning to recognise this reality. As a result, the SNC is now involved in multiple negotiation processes. Previously, our negotiations were primarily with the UN and the regime, but today, we are also engaging with numerous countries – regional and international – as well as various actors within Syria. The demand for the SNC to manage these negotiations has grown recently, and this is met by the SNC's belief that we cannot simply wait for third parties to resolve the Syrian crisis; we must actively engage in finding pathways to a political solution in line with UNSCR 2254.

Does your outreach include the protest movement in Suweida, where activists have elected a representative political body?

Jamous: Since the beginning of the protests in Suweida, we established a committee to engage with and support the Suweida movement. We have held meetings with their representatives and invited them to speak at meetings with international stakeholders. Recently, we proposed that they elect a representative to join the SNC in order to ensure their voice is strong and effectively represented.

The UN Special Envoy for Syria has prioritised progress on the Constitutional Committee and confidence-building measures through a step-for-step methodology, but no progress has been made. How do you assess the potential of both initiatives?

Jamous: The Constitutional Committee and the step-

for-step approach are relevant as they derive their legitimacy from UNSCR 2254. However, the regime's refusal to engage with the UN and its constant evasion of international commitments have stalled any meaningful progress. We believe the Special Envoy's mandate allows for more assertive action, such as transparently reporting the state of negotiations – including clearly identifying spoilers – to the UN Security Council. This transparency is essential to trigger new discussions and apply the necessary pressure on the regime to move forward.

Moreover, the Special Envoy should increase international coordination by involving Arab countries, the Arab League contact group, Turkey, the EU, US and others. Currently, each actor engages with the regime separately, and after 15 months, Arab countries have made little to no progress. The Special Envoy should unify these separate efforts into a cohesive dialogue to exert greater pressure on the regime.

Until now, attempts for confidence-building measures seem to be bilaterally between governments and the regime, or between the West and the regime, with the opposition sidelined. Where do you see the SNC's role in this process?

Jamous: The Syrian crisis began in 2011 as a conflict between the regime and the Syrian people, and not between the regime and other countries. For confidence-building measures to be effective and legitimate, they must equally involve the opposition. We consistently remind Mr Pedersen that his mandate is to mediate between the opposition and the regime, not between the regime and other states. The SNC is prepared for this role and has concrete ideas to bring to the table.

Amidst the US's indifference towards Syria, you called for enhanced political cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Turkey on the Syrian file to create new diplomatic momentum. Do you see that happening now?

Jamous: There are positive indicators following the Saudi foreign minister's visit to Ankara, including discussions about a Turkish-Saudi strategic council. We see potential for meaningful synergies between Saudi Arabia and Turkey on the Syrian file. Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in the Arab world and in the Arab contact group, while Turkey is a key regional power with a significant presence on the ground in Syria and hosts millions of Syrians. Turkish-Saudi cooperation could indeed be a powerful catalyst for advancing the political process.

Northern Syria has recently seen protests against the Syrian opposition that were, among other things, triggered by reports of a possible Turkey-Assad rapprochement. Do you think Turkey, as one of your closest allies, is undermining your support among the Syrian people?

Jamous: We understand the frustrations of the Syrian people. They have suffered greatly from arrests, displacements, and killings, and the continued destruction of Syrian society by the regime. The Syrian people are angry about the ongoing crisis, and disappointed with countries that supported them for years and now seem to turn towards the regime.

The lack of clarity from the Turkish leadership regarding normalisation with the regime was surprising and sometimes confusing. However, Turkey has assured us that while it seeks to address specific issues with the regime, it will not pressure the political or military opposition. We have a meeting scheduled with the Turkish foreign minister to discuss these matters thoroughly. Ultimately, the decision rests with Ankara, but without a political solution that ensures a new future for Syria, refugees will not return, and terrorism will persist.

There are also governance issues that we are working to address. Turkey is committed to Syria's unity and opposes the consolidation of separate regions within the country. This understandable stance has led to governance challenges, and we believe that there is a need for increased and better management by Syrians themselves. We are actively engaging with the Turkish leadership, and there are promises of greater Syrian involvement in managing northern Syria.

How do you view the future of the SNC?

Jamous: The opposition has faced significant challenges over the years, often weakened by regional and international conflicts and by the geographical dispersion of its members. Parts of the opposition have been scattered in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Western countries. Disagreements among these countries have affected the opposition considerably.

For almost two years now, however, we have been on a path to recovery. The SNC has reconvened, reassembled its components, and opened up to the Syrian people. We have a very challenging task ahead of us: building a united front. This is our focus: creat-

ing a strong Syrian front behind the SNC to uphold UNSCR 2254. This front must be representative and robust, including all segments of the Syrian population: active forces on the ground, local leaders, interest groups, diaspora communities, research centers, activists, and many other components of civil society.

The SNC has a comprehensive plan to achieve this and my extended term will allow us to continue the strides we have already made. For the first time this year, the SNC participated in the Brussels VIII donor conference, supported by Syrian civil society and our international friends and partners. However, there is still much work to be done to strengthen our presence, both among our constituents in Syria and in the diaspora.

The Peacemakers

The Peacemakers is a satirical novel about a fictional peace NGO founded by ex-UN diplomat Gerald Baynes. With grand plans before he retires and writes his memoirs, Gerald takes on an assignment that changes the trajectory of the Syria conflict. Any similarities to real persons or events are, of course, purely coincidental.

The novel will be serialised in *Syria in Transition*. To read more visit

www.syriaintransition.com/peacemakers

Part I

1.1 The Grand Opening

Audio diary entry - 8/9/2014

It was 5:30am when my alarm went off that wet September morning in Geneva. I slipped into my bathrobe and finally tackled what I'd been putting off for months: shaving off my beard, which recently had become so out of control that some haters started tweeting "Jihadi Gerald" memes. As the whiskers fell into the sink, memories rushed back. At the start of the year, I had retired after thirty years at the UN with deployments in the most challenging conflict zones. I had negotiated with dictators, oligarchs and warlords. None of it had actually improved matters in the slightest; but the talking had felt amazing.

Having retired, on the advice of my wife I flew to a silent retreat in Goa to unwind and plan my future. Repeated violations of the no-talking rule, however, meant that I was expelled after just three days. Slightly embarrassed but in good spirits, I spent the next four months hitchhiking down India's east coast to Tamil Nadu. When I saw the countless fishing boats along the coast, I couldn't help but recall the Sri Lankan civil war, in which the Tamil Tigers' arms supply routes had relied on the self-same vessels. I'd been there as a junior UN officer. How quaint I must have looked in my Man from Del Monte outfit – like a time traveller who hadn't yet attended the seminar on post-colonial guilt.

Reflecting on those early days, I mused that had I been given a free hand by New York I might almost

have ended that conflict before it had even started. My mediation could have made a big difference; and even now I still had what it takes, Oh yes indeed! The thought matured over the next fortnight, during which I worked for room and board in the kitchen of a delightful German expat couple who offered yoga sessions with wandering cows on the beach. And then it hit me: before I could write my memoirs, I needed a grand finale: one last hurrah; something truly impactful to cap my journey. I knew what I had to do! I would start a peace NGO – one with a humble and catchy name. Without hesitation, I settled on "The Peacemakers."

Now clean-shaven, I donned my suit, sipped my morning matcha, and slid into my Tesla. It was the big day of The Peacemakers' office grand opening. Thanks to generous donations from old friends from Oxford and connections in politics and business, I'd been able to secure 4000m² of prime Geneva real estate, within sight of the Palais des Nations. I looked in the rear-view mirror and smiled contentedly. In the world's crisis countries I'd encountered corruption and nepotism at every turn; it was wonderful to receive funds from people with no ulterior motives. I would not disappoint them.

However, The Peacemakers' success would be difficult to gauge and hard even to see – a bit like that of the world's spooks. As I pondered such matters, three questions came to mind: Did ex-UN officials get the appreciation they deserved? How was I going to meet the women's quota on The Peacemakers' advisory board while still accommodating my most important friends? And where the hell was I?! Lost in thought, I'd missed the exit and ended up in an industrial park.

I U-turned and headed back towards the city center. While waiting at a traffic light, I checked my intelligence asset (Twitter). "*Fighting in Aleppo flares up, dozens of civilians killed*", the CNN headlines said. Then a WhatsApp message popped up from my old friend Jason Doll, US Presidential Advisor on Middle East Affairs. "*Hi Gerald. POTUS wants something done on the Aleppo siege.. Let's talk tomorrow.*" This was fantastic news! For The Peacemakers' debut, the only initiative I had lined up was an 18-month long consultative workshop project on "The Future of Multilateral Mediation in the Age of Climate Change." I had the Finnish foreign ministry's underspend to thank for

The Peacemakers

that (and the favour the FM owed me after his Bangkok debacle), but the makings of a Nobel Peace Prize it was not. Saving Aleppo was much more up my alley.

A few minutes later, I spotted the Palais des Nations, glinting in the rain - a beacon of bureaucratic hope. Our spanking new offices were just down the street. I parked and straightened my tie. The world hadn't yet seen the last of Gerald Baynes.

Read the next instalment in the September issue of SiT.