2017 Mercator-IPC Visiting Senior Fellow Yezid Sayigh convened a breakfast talk on “Prospects for Syria” on June 16, 2017 at Vault Karaköy. The talk was moderated by IPC Director Fuat Keyman. In his opening speech, Prof. Keyman pointed out that the Syrian crisis is a multilayered conflict. It poses great challenges from humanitarianism to state crises. Keyman underlined that the reality within Syria is neglected due to an abundance of issues. Sayigh began his speech by concluding that he does not think there will be a formal political solution in Syria. He emphasized that there will be a political outcome but that it will not be recognized as a formal diplomatic process, as in the Geneva talks, for two main reasons. The first reason is that Bashar al-Assad and his regime will not engage in a settlement with the opposition since the regime has to take a stand against challenges to its sovereignty. Second, the regime will not want to legitimize the standing of external powers vis-à-vis Syria’s domestic political arrangements for this very reason. Sayigh then posed the central question of his speech: when the war ends what kind of political outcome will there be?

Sayigh turned back to what is happening on the ground in order to estimate the possible political outcomes for Syria. The direct involvement of the main actors has complicated the crisis and created a dynamic situation in terms of the actors’ relations. Sayigh described this as “dynamic equilibrium.” In his view, the situation is dynamic as each actor undertakes new measures; it is also in equilibrium in the sense that each party’s actions are met by the counteractions of other parties without constant escalation. This point may bring us to either a showdown or a deal. In many semi-academic imaginings of this regional rivalry, speculations focus on the possibility of a big battle in Deir ez-Zor. However, Sayigh remarked that this imagining overlooks the realities on the ground. He added that the emerging rivalry in Eastern Syria will have a political outcome.

The battle for Raqqa is at the core of the conflict, and how it is handled is going to determine the future configuration in Syria, Sayigh stated. In that vein, the challenge is not so much winning the battle for Raqqa but who takes control of the area afterwards. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) is the only power that has proven to be effective against the Islamic State (DAESH) in Raqqa, but the local population’s perspective on possible Kurdish rule is still questionable. He said that although the widely-known narrative assumes that Sunni Muslims are opposed to the regime, many of them have been fighting for the regime in areas such as Aleppo and so on. Therefore, further analysis must be conducted in order to understand what the Arab population wants. Sayigh emphasized that another key element in the battle for Raqqa is the position of the United States. If the SDF succeeds in Raqqa, the political challenges will be even more imminent. However, Sayigh claims that due to the Trump administration’s lack of an official Syrian policy, the White House has no idea how to handle a political transformation.

Towards the end of his speech, Sayigh turned back to the political aspects of the conflict after discussing the details of military operations in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. He highlighted the prospects of the ongoing Astana talks, which aim to establish a general cease-fire in all regime and opposition areas. For now, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have agreed on the creation of de-escalation zones, which will be protected by the participating countries. Sayigh commented that this would bring stability and, to some extent, a return to normal life. He
concluded that some parts of the opposition are ready to focus on practical issues rather than political aims.