



The Syrian Civil War: An Interim Balance Sheet

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The desire of the international community to end the Syrian civil war is offset by the inability of any individual party to enforce its preferred solution. The conflict, which is likely to continue for some time, has solidified the centrality of Russia and Iran in regional affairs. Israel's options are limited.

Intensified diplomatic efforts by the international community to put an end to the civil war in Syria are unlikely to reach a political long-term arrangement before the warring parties are exhausted by the conflict. It is often weariness that brings armed conflicts to a close, rather than a promising political solution offered by a disinterested mediator or international conference.

Significantly, no protagonist seems to have overwhelming power to enforce its preferred solution. The Sunni powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, tried to unseat Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the ally of Shiite Iran, but displayed weakness that was exploited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah. Even American aid to the Sunni rebels was ineffective. The much feared Islamic State (IS), born as a result of the disintegration of Iraq and Syria, was not strong enough to tackle the Assad regime successfully. The Russian military intervention was able to strengthen Assad's grip over parts of Syria, but was not enough to restore his rule over the entire country.

This means that Syria will remain divided among several warring factions for some time to come. The fractured country will continue to be an arena in which local chiefs will try to expand their areas of control and in which outsiders will compete for influence. Fluidity and ambiguity will continue to characterize the arena.

This equivocal situation is producing winners and losers, but it is Iran that is emerging with the upper hand. Assad is still in power, which means Tehran retains its clout in Damascus, a former capital of an Arab empire. Damascus is also the linchpin to Beirut, where the Shiite Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy, exercises effective power. Moreover, the Syrian crisis has amplified the threat perception of IS in the West, making Iran a potential ally in western attempts to curb radical Sunni Islamists. Such perceptions also help Iran strengthen its control over Iraq. Iran has been successful in preserving the Shiite corridor, a key objective in its quest for hegemony in the Middle East and for projecting force further away.

Russia emerged as a beneficiary of the lingering Syrian crisis even before its military intervention in September 2015. It was successful in providing the diplomatic mechanism that enabled Obama to renege on his ultimatum against Assad's use of chemical weapons, and has effectively defended the Assad regime at international fora. The Russian intervention on Assad's behalf also signaled that Moscow is a reliable ally, a message that resonates well among the political elites of the Middle East and beyond.

In addition, Russia preserved its strategic assets on the Syrian coast in the eastern Mediterranean after investing for years in the build-up of its Mediterranean flotilla. Russia, a large energy producer with global interests, has also maintained the exploration rights to the potential gas findings along the Syrian coast—a part of the rich Levant Basin.

In contrast, the Syrian turmoil provided plenty of proof that the US, under Obama, is not adept at dealing with Middle East realities. One early example was the Obama administration's initial inclination to try to engage foes, such as Syria (and Iran). A defining moment of American weakness was the retreat from threats to use force against Assad for crossing the chemical weapons red line (August 2012).

The American campaign against IS has provided additional evidence about the retreat of American power in the Middle East. In August 2014, after a confused and long decision-making process, the US concluded that the territorial conquests of IS are evolving into a significant threat to American interests and ordered its air force to raid installations of IS in Syria (and Iraq). Unfortunately, the gap between the goals and the capabilities of the US and its allies bolstered IS's dual message about the weakness of the decadent West and its own invincibility. By the beginning of 2016, the war against IS appeared stalemated. The US failed to induce local actors to cooperate effectively against it, and the limited air campaign has been insufficient.

In contrast, it was Russian air support that secured a victory for Assad against IS (the March 2016 conquest of Palmyra). The Russian intervention underscored American passivity even as it elicited dismissive statements by Obama, who called it a quagmire for Russian forces and absolved himself of the need to take any action. Obama did not specify how he would respond to Russian aircraft targeting US-supported rebel factions in the civil war other than to underline that the US would not directly confront Moscow. The tacit expectation that Syria would turn into a Vietnam or Afghanistan experience for Russia turned out to be unfounded.

Turkey appears to be at a loss after several years of futile support for Syrian rebels. The destabilization of Syria has underscored Turkey's long porous border, which exposes the country to terrorist attacks. At the same time, the influx of a multitude of refugees fleeing the mayhem has exacted an economic price on Ankara. Turkey's crucial support for IS has been gradually revealed, the full diplomatic cost of which remains to be seen.

While Turkey has shown itself ready to confront Iran by proxies in Syria, underscoring the Sunni-Shiite fault lines and the regional Persian-Turkish rivalry, that readiness may well precipitate Iranian support for Kurdish militias, which constitutes a national security threat. Turkey also miscalculated in November 2015 by shooting down a Russian fighter, an action that triggered a deterioration in Turkey's strategic position by reviving the Ottoman-Russian historical enmity.

In addition, Turkey's Syrian policy has had the unintended consequence of empowering the most virulently anti-Turkish Kurdish elements. These Kurds have achieved a measure of autonomy in several regions in northern Syria, and have earned some Western support thanks to their effectiveness against IS. Still, the limited self-rule the Kurds have established, and the international attention they have attracted to their cause, will not be enough for state-building. For them to achieve full autonomy, they will have to overcome internal discord and their lack of territorial contiguity.

Israel continues to be a spectator as the Syrian tragedy unfolds, with occasional pinpoint interventions when immediate national security interests are at stake. The disappearance of the Syrian military threat to Israel is not, of course, inimical to its interests. But the entrenchment of Iran in Damascus, with substantial Russian help, constitutes a critical national security threat to Israel, because it strengthens the radical axis led by Iran in a Middle East from which the US has largely retreated. The possibility of opening a new front on the Golan Heights is a secondary issue that also needs the attention of the Israeli military.

The Syrian arena provides Israel with diplomatic opportunities to nourish relationships with reluctant actors. Jerusalem must work under the assumption that Syria cannot easily be fixed and that conflict is likely to continue. Israel's interactions within its strategic environment are inherently limited. The use of force, often inevitable in our neighborhood, must be carefully calibrated in light of domestic and international constraints.

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