



PERSPECTIVES

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Breaking the Syrian Stalemate

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 713, January 11, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the civil war in Syria winds down, ISIS is eliminated, and the chips begin to fall where they may, the aftermath appears profoundly tangled, with every imaginable interest pitted against all the others. But the situation is not unnavigable. Winners and losers are emerging, and a few wild card players are entering the fray that might disrupt the developing status quo.

The US is currently at a great disadvantage in Syria. Despite blaming its increasing irrelevancy in the region on the Obama administration's inaction in pursuit of the nuclear deal with Iran, the Trump White House chose to box itself into a corner by disregarding [sage advice](#) that would have significantly shifted the calculus of power. Rather than supporting the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, preventing Iran from building a land corridor connecting it to the Mediterranean, and thereby making it more difficult for Lebanon's Hezbollah to smuggle weapons and people in and out, the Trump administration chose a strategy that empowered Tehran's proxy, Baghdad; allowed Moscow to emerge as the great dealmaker; and served Turkey's interests with respect to the Kurdish issue in Syria.

Without the land corridor, Iran would have been geographically [poorly positioned](#) to expand in the direction of Central Asia, or indeed anywhere else. Instead, it is now in the best possible position to do so. Furthermore, Bashar Assad has called US-backed groups [traitors](#), and, echoing President Putin, asked American and Turkish troops to leave.

The Pentagon says a US presence will remain in Syria indefinitely, but should Iran and Russia-backed Assad turn serious, US troops might find themselves having to fight enemies on several fronts. It is unclear why the US, which has essentially accepted the premises that ISIS is finished and other terrorist groups

are either subdued or subordinate to state actors, chooses to remain in the area without a clear plan to remove Iranian proxies. Washington seems to have [no action plan](#) to deal with Iran, though it is certainly a threat.

Assad is a pawn of Iran and Russia. Tehran is looking to get rid of him; Moscow is amenable to his staying – at least for now. Assad is content with his remaining fiefdom so long as the various groups that have subdivided Syria pay their dues, recognize Syrian sovereignty, and don't create additional problems.

Iran is getting exactly what it wanted: a land corridor to suit its expansionist plans, and a naval base that will give it access to strategic waterways. Once its navy becomes fully operational, it can then fight to deny access to everyone else. Resource-poor Syria was likely never the end unto itself for Tehran, but rather a means towards outward expansion.

The mullahs do not care how many countries are brought to ruin so long as their path is smooth and their access to the outside world guaranteed. That Tehran does not have complete control over Syria at the moment is irrelevant. Its object is not to lord it over Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and assorted others, but to assert Iranian hegemony and break through the sanctions and obstacles by finding new routes and creating new alliances.

Iran's Iraqi militias are spoiling for a fight. They are a [battle-hardened](#), increasingly serious force against largely untrained Gulf troops who also lack proper intelligence training. Iran feels so much in control of the situation that it is looking to completely [coopt the KRG](#) in exchange for peace.

Russia is unquestionably the biggest winner of all. It has established itself as a credible power broker; has outsmarted and manipulated both the Obama and the Trump administrations; and is building a naval base, despite Russia's poor internal economy, sanctions, and increasing loss of legitimacy in the West. It has returned to its former sphere of influence and is setting the rules of the game.

Moscow is also very good at taking advantage of strategic errors made by others. Ankara, for example, which managed to ruin its relations with Assad early on in the civil war, will now have a great deal of trouble imposing its will inside the country. Russia is successfully building a relationship with the Syrian Kurds and assuming a protectorate over them even as Turkey seeks to isolate the YPG and deny the Kurds legitimacy in their struggle for autonomy. Russia is [succeeding](#) at bringing the Kurds to the table in [peace process](#) negotiations, something Turkey sought to deny.

Inexplicably, despite supporting Turkey's humiliation in Syria, Russia is also warming towards Ankara on other fronts – by providing oil from a formerly KRG-

held pipeline, building a massive gas pipeline, selling Turkey S-400s, and coordinating on various security issues. Simultaneously, Russia is seen by Israel as the moderator of Iranian aggression – as the adult in the room who can diffuse growing tensions as Iranian proxies move ever closer to the Israeli border. Russia, acting from a position of strength, has refused to commit to such a position.

Turkey might appear to be down and out, but it has not given up its neo-Ottoman quest. President Erdoğan is channeling aggression against everyone's favorite scapegoats, Israel and the US, in a valiant attempt to gain popularity on the street, even as he is losing battles against other emerging or aspiring hegemony. Indeed, his popularity inside Turkey [remains high](#) and he is in no danger of losing his position.

Turkey, despite decades of secular law, has remained overall under Islamic influence, and it took only a few years of the openly Islamist leadership of the AKP, coupled with unabashedly nationalist populism, to bring a much more conservative culture to the fore. Erdoğan's Islamism is hardly [moderate](#). It is political and aggressive, and it sports a revolutionary brand.

As Morocco and Saudi Arabia battle with extremism and seek to move away from the Islamist religious fervor of ISIS or the extreme orthodoxy of the religious clergy, Erdoğan's Turkey is moving in the opposite direction. And despite international political defeats, the Turkish president is using the same populism that succeeded in Turkey to attract wide Sunni support on the Arab street all over the Middle East while positioning himself as the new Sunni leader.

His primary tool is naked opportunism. He turns every history-focused [Twitter battle](#) with UAE leadership into a populist mantra for public consumption, and took advantage of the massive popular outrage over President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and intent to move the US embassy there. He likewise seeks to undermine Gulf leadership, particularly in Saudi Arabia, whose response to the Jerusalem issue has been muted if not [disinterested](#).

It is in the areas of emotion, anger, and smear campaigning that Erdoğan has wide popular appeal. If Muhammad bin Salman and President Trump are not careful, they may come out the losers. Ankara is growing closer to Tehran and Qatar, both of which are staunch opponents of the Gulf alliance (Iran is openly adversarial). Like Tehran, which uses [cheap populism and the Palestinian issue](#) to appeal to the masses and distract them from the regime's own crimes against Iran's minorities, Ankara somehow manages to portray itself as a defender of the Palestinians while simultaneously vilifying Turkey's Kurds,

Armenians, and other ethnic and religious minorities. Sooner or later, these contrasting dynamics between the Arab states and the non-Arab aspiring hegemon will clash – not only in proxy states and through political stand-offs, but quite possibly in the streets. Whether that's something Saudi Arabia is willing to risk or [can afford](#) in the long term remains to be seen.

Israel is better positioned than it has ever been. Its growing alliance with the Gulf States is the world's worst-kept secret. It still maintains diplomatic relations with Turkey (which, admittedly, is a fairly negligible bulwark against future aggression). Likewise, the relationship with the US is in a very good place, and the relationship with Russia is tense but stable.

Still, Erdoğan's increasingly heated rhetoric is a problem. Turkey's army is quite strong and is no longer run by secularists. Iranians and their militias are close to the Israel-Syria border. While Tehran might not wish for an immediate confrontation, more [border incursions](#) are not out of the question if Iran grows sufficiently strong and well-armed and if its regional alliances and colonization pan out as planned. And should Hezbollah prosper as a result of the land corridor, they may eventually be better positioned to launch another war.

Enter **China**. Chinese Uyghurs, a Muslim Turkic minority of approximately 100 million people, has been widely dissatisfied with the Chinese crackdown on Islam and other freedoms. Internal terrorist attacks have not sufficed; Uyghurs have moved on to Syria to join ISIS and other terrorist groups in a show of opposition. For the first time, Beijing recently sent [its own troops](#) to Syria to deal with this problem, a significant development that has been largely overlooked.

China is not without its own ambitions in the Middle East. After completing its first base in Djibouti – with an eye towards partaking in counterterrorism operations as much as safeguarding its own interests – Beijing may very well be looking towards building its own naval base in Syria.

Syria has already asked China, rather than the US, to [assist with postwar reconstruction](#) – a questionable request given Beijing's proclivity towards leaving massive infrastructure undertakings incomplete, but one that will establish China as a serious player in the Middle East. Beijing is leaning, however, towards supporting Russia despite significant economic interests on other fronts. Will China prove to be the wild card that disrupts Turkey's plans and takes it out of the equation?

Uyghurs may end up playing the role that Turkmen played earlier in the Civil War. Ankara may try to coopt them on the basis of common Turkic and Muslim identity. If Turkey ends up supporting Uyghur rebellion inside China, there is

trouble in the air for both countries. If there is one thing Turkey cannot take on right now, it's a stand-off with China.

While the direction in which these events will unfold remains unclear, it is evident that Turkey is the weakest link in the Syrian mess – yet one with sky-high ambitions and a powerful populist vote that can undermine well-meaning efforts at moderation. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States are militarily unprepared to take on Iran at the moment, and they have no plan for dealing with Iran should the dissatisfied minorities within its borders succeed at bringing down the corrupt leadership. It would be ill-advised to try to confront Iran directly right now. Rather, weakening its alliances and disrupting its proxies are the best way to go.

The US should work actively with friendly Gulf states to turn their forces into fully functional armies that are strong enough to be at least somewhat self-sufficient and to be of significant help in pushing back against Iranian proxy expansionism. While this is a belated and long-term undertaking, it will put the US in a much better position to take decisive and necessary action in Syria and Iraq.

It is also time to start discussing options for Iran beyond the Islamic Republic. This will not be an easy discussion, but it is necessary. The regime is stronger than it has ever been, and it has gone too far to slink back to its shadowy, pre-nuclear deal ignominy.

And as for Russia? Very little can be done about it at the moment. For the time being, it should continue to be regarded exactly as it has been until now: as an aggressive, self-interested, adversarial state that is openly aligned with the enemies of the West and that seeks the worst for the Middle East.

The mess on the ground in Syria is not simply a tangled web of unfathomable relationships. It contains a clear number of state and non-state actors, each with its own interests and plans of action. If the US is to emerge safely from this minefield, it will need to summon both prescience and the willingness to take the time to understand who is an enemy and who an ally.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family