

The Crisis in Syria: Learning to Live with It

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What Has Changed?

The past year has been marked by alternating feelings of hope and despair regarding the possibility of ending the ongoing crisis in Syria and implementing a political process that reflects the will of the Syrian nation for the future of their country. The situation is particularly complex given that the civil war in Syria is also a proxy war, as a significant portion of the belligerents are proxies of foreign forces.

The Russian military intervention that began in September 2015, designed to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad when the balance of power turned against him, is the first significant landmark of the time period in question. Russia's involvement is reflected mainly in its air offense and the establishment of a coalition of forces that want Assad's rule to continue: Iran, Hezbollah, and other Shiite militias under Iranian command. President Vladimir Putin believed that immediate and noteworthy military gains would be a sufficient basis for initiating a political process that would lead to an enforceable ceasefire, after which a transitional government would be established that would maintain the existing regime. This, in Moscow's view, would preserve Russia's increasing influence over events in Syria in the present and the future.¹

After months of effective fighting, Russia succeeded in stabilizing the Assad regime, but it did not succeed in changing the balance of power toward a victory for Assad's forces over the rebels. In February 2016, there was a sense that all the belligerents were tired of five years of cruel, ongoing

combat. Under pressure from Russia and the United States, a “cessation of hostilities”² went into effect between all parties other than the Islamic State and the branches of al-Qaeda. However, after a short process of recovery and rehabilitation by the forces supporting President Assad as well as by the rebel organizations, the fighting was renewed. This was mainly due to the violation of the ceasefire by the pro-Assad coalition, which under the guise of attacking the Salafi jihadist organizations, attacked the other rebel organizations. Russia’s goal was to entrench the dichotomous formula whereby there are only two political options in Syria – the continuation of the current Alawite regime or the Islamic State (or some other Salafi jihadist framework)³ – in order to bring about international acceptance of Assad’s rule.

After the collapse of the ceasefire, a new balance of power emerged between the various rebel groups (not including the Islamic State) and the pro-Assad coalition, whereby the fighting continued with varying intensity, with neither side able to achieve victory. Since then, the fighting has focused on two arenas in northern Syria: the Aleppo-Idlib region, which is vital for reaching the Alawite region,⁴ and the Syria-Turkey border region. Due to the strategic logistical importance of the border, Syrian-Kurdish forces have attempted to take control of it entirely, and to control the supply and transportation routes between Turkey and Syria.⁵ Meanwhile, US airstrikes against Islamic State outposts have continued, and a new organization was established – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This group is a Kurdish-Arab coalition backed by the US whose goal is to push the Islamic State out of northern Syria, take control of its enclave in Manbij (near the Syria-Turkey border), and then take control of al-Raqqa, the Islamic State capital in Syria.⁶

While the United States focused on fighting against the Islamic State, the pro-Assad coalition led by Russia and Iran continued to strike Syrian rebel forces indiscriminately, in order to neutralize any internal alternative to Assad’s rule. This included ongoing attacks against the noncombatant civilian population and use of chemical weapons (mainly chlorine gas), which killed thousands of civilians and caused widespread environmental damage that will take many years and massive investment to reverse.

Another attempt by the United States and Russia to enforce a ceasefire occurred in September 2016, at the time of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha. This time the United States attempted to learn from the collapse of the

February ceasefire by creating a Joint Implementation Center for the United States and Russia, to enable focused air activity against the Islamic State and the terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, as well as prevention of attacks against civilians and the “moderate” rebel organizations. In addition, the United States expected Russia to restrain the forces loyal to Assad and prevent them from violating the ceasefire. However, this attempt was a complete failure, and after Eid al-Adha, Assad’s forces, with massive Russian air support, continued to attack all of the rebels in the Aleppo region, causing severe harm to civilians and the civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, and prevented international elements from providing humanitarian aid in the besieged battle zones. In light of these developments, the United States announced that it was suspending its participation in the Joint Implementation Center. Washington explicitly ascribed responsibility for the escalation to Moscow, due to its intensification of the air strikes (3,265 civilians were killed during a year of Russian air strikes) with weapons that also cause significant environmental damage,⁷ along with its lack of desire or ability to restrain Assad, to force him to respect the ceasefire and prevent attacks against noncombatant civilians.

The situation in the Syrian war zone provoked harsh criticism in Washington of the policy of non-intervention led by President Obama, and various proposals have been sounded for American military action against Assad’s forces. Ideas include a no-fly zone for combat aircraft and attack helicopters; offensive action to ground Assad’s planes and helicopters; security zones designated as safe havens for Syrian civilians fleeing the killing zones; and equipment of the moderate rebels with advanced weapon systems, including shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles that can bring down planes and helicopters. The very discussion of US military intervention against Assad’s forces provoked deterring Russian messages, which included reference to a harsh response and even reinforcement of the Russian forces stationed in Syria with advanced air defense systems – S-300VM (SA-23).

In October 2016, the Iraqi government launched an offensive to liberate Mosul in northern Iraq from the control of the Islamic State. The United States is the power that drove and has guided the attack; Iraqi forces were joined by Kurdish Peshmerga and Shiite militias backed by Iran. The campaign to liberate Mosul prompted the question of the liberation of al-Raqqa. To

this end, American forces created the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprising Syrian, Kurdish, and Sunni forces. The Obama administration hoped that Syrian rebel forces (other than Salafi jihadist groups) would liberate al-Raqqa, before the pro-Assad coalition or Turkey would accomplish this.

Significant changes have also occurred with regard to prominent regional forces, namely Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Of these three states, only Turkey shares a border with Syria, and hence its policy is particularly influential. While Ankara has declared that it is interested in the existence of a unified Syria within the state's borders,⁸ its priority in Syria is clear: preventing Kurdish autonomy. Indeed, the questions of Assad's future and the fighting against the Islamic State have proven to be less important. In the summer of 2016, Turkey launched a ground operation to take control of the town of Jarabulus, and via the United States push Kurdish forces out of the Manbij pocket, which allows them control of the Turkey-Syria border area west of the Euphrates. Saudi Arabia has continued to support the rebel groups by transferring weapons and money, but contrary to its declarations has not succeeded in creating, and in fact has not even attempted to create, an inter-Arab force to fight against the Islamic State in Syria. Saudi Arabia has been careful to coordinate policy actions regarding Syria with Turkey, and is eager to keep Ankara within the Sunni axis that it is trying to lead. Meanwhile Iran has stood firmly behind the Assad regime, reinforcing the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force with regular Iranian army forces and Afghani and Pakistani Shia militias under Iranian command. These forces, along with Hezbollah, have borne the brunt of the ground battle against the Syrian rebels (and not against the Islamic State). After the failed coup attempt in Turkey, there were signs of Turkish rapprochement with Russia and Iran. However, Turkey, a member of NATO, sees the Western alliance as its most important framework, certainly more than any possible military alliance with Russia. Indeed, Turkey is highly suspicious of Russia, given its support of the Kurds and the air strikes it carries out against rebel organizations that are associated with Turkey and are not Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (the al-Nusra Front) or the Islamic State.⁹

The American Dilemma

The United States was hard pressed to formulate plans of action and clear defined goals about the future of Syria, unlike Russia, which is working steadily to achieve its goals, among them, destroying Syrian opposition forces and translating the military success into a political achievement, whereby the process of deposing Assad will evolve into a process that will ensure his continued rule. President Obama adhered to his decision not to send US ground forces to Syria, based on the assumption that creating, training, and arming rebel groups who share common interests with the West, especially those that belong to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), “would get the job done on the ground.” However, as the fighting continued, it became clear to the United States that there is no real alternative within Syria to the Assad regime and that the Sunni organizations, hostile and divided, are unable to unify. Moreover, it appears that their natural tendency is actually to connect – practically and ideologically – with Salafi jihadist groups, especially Jabhat Fateh al-Sham.¹⁰ The ceasefire agreements served the jihadist propaganda that claims that the United States seeks to leave Assad in power. Consequently, the United States has not been able to achieve its goals, foremost among them preventing radicalization of the rebels and achieving an agreement – and instead is witnessing the opposite.

Against this background, in the sixth year of the Syrian civil war, some administration officials criticized American policy in Syria. In particular, there has been criticism of the White House’s decision not to insist on a new regime in Syria, especially in light of Assad’s continuing to massacre his people, and despite his consistent violations of the ceasefire agreements achieved with Russian and American intervention. The strategy formulated by President Obama focused first on defeating and dismantling the Islamic State, and only then on shaping Syria’s future. But this strategy did not take into account the fact that as long as Assad continues to rule, there will be enough Sunni groups and volunteers willing to join the Islamic State and other Salafi jihadist organizations with the goal of overthrowing him. Thus, the dynamic in effect preempts the requisite process, since to dilute the potential reservoir of volunteers, the element catalyzing the process, namely, Assad’s ongoing rule, must be neutralized.¹¹

Initial signs of US policy under the Trump administration do not signal a change in tendency to allow Russia to lead the external intervention in Syria, even if it is clear to the top bureaucracy in Washington that leaving the arena in the hands of the United States' main rival, Russia, or in the hands of Iran – especially after the nuclear agreement – would be to shoot itself in the foot. Accordingly, Washington tried to refute allegations that the United States has allowed Iran to advance its regional standing under the mantle of the nuclear agreement and at the expense of American allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey – and in effect ignores the brutal damage caused every day in Syria to the universal values that the United States has tried to promote worldwide.

It seems that the United States will not step up its military intervention in northern Syria at least until reformulation of its policy under the Trump administration, despite the collapse of the ceasefire in September 2016 and despite the fact that the massive increase in air and ground attacks by the pro-Assad coalition in the Aleppo region, in part with chemical weapons, has led to increased pressure on the United States and on President Obama in particular to respond militarily. The interim period between administrations is an opportunity for Assad forces to take over the rule of Aleppo in Syria. Meanwhile, the offensive to free Mosul in Iraq formed a kind of competition, who would free the areas still held by the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and especially the city of al-Raqqa.

Possible Scenarios

It is hard to predict the future, and certainly to foretell how the war in Syria will end, but it is possible to outline a number of scenarios. Some may be temporary and constitute a transition period toward an end state, while others relate to the regional dimension such that different end states may be possible in different regions. Through these scenarios it is possible, if not to predict the future, at least to highlight the strategic factors that will influence the future of Syria.

- a. *Syria as a unified country under Alawite rule.* Russia and Iran still believe that they have the ability to ensure the survival of the Alawite regime, with or without Bashar al-Assad as president. This would allow both countries to maintain their influence in Syria. This scenario is not compatible with

long term American interests, but in order to achieve stability in the short term, the United States will not attempt to torpedo the continuation of Alawite rule – as long as Assad does not remain in power at the end of the transition period. The likelihood of this scenario increases if the Trump administration deposits the Syrian portfolio with Russia. In contrast, in the internal Syrian arena, there is likely to be a lack of consensus regarding the continuation of Assad's oppressive regime, especially considering the hundreds of thousands of civilians murdered during the war. It is hard to believe that the rebel organizations would agree to disarm and that practical agreements could be achieved to prevent revenge killings and settling of accounts. Saudi Arabia and perhaps even Turkey would not accept leaving the Alawite regime in place, which would result in an Iranian-sponsored Shiite dominance in Syria. In order for such a scenario to be viable in the long term, the international community would have to be responsible for promoting inter-ethnic reconciliation and offering massive international aid for the rehabilitation of Syria's infrastructure and economy.

- b. *Syria as a unified country under Sunni rule.* Despite the clear Sunni majority in Syria, Sunni rule appears at present to be a distant vision. In order for such a scenario to materialize, the different rebel factions would have to set aside their disputes and rivalries, and come together to form a critical mass with the power to overthrow the Alawite regime. Even if this happens, there would likely be internal Sunni tension regarding the future character of Syria: secular and democratic, or political Islamic (dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood), or Salafi Islamist governed by *sharia* law. Russia could accept such a situation on condition that the new regime would grant it control over its strategic outposts in the Mediterranean – the naval facility in Tartus and the Khmeimim Air Base – for an unlimited time period, and that its influence in Syria would be maintained. Unlike Russia, Iran could not accept this scenario, and would continue to operate its proxies in order to undermine the situation from within and prevent consolidation of a Sunni regime. The United States could support a Sunni government led by the Muslim Brotherhood, as long as it ensured that minorities would not be oppressed and it did not develop links with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Turkey would prefer

this scenario over continued chaos or Syria remaining under Alawite rule. As for the local population, it would likely accept a Sunni identity for the country, and it is also likely that the majority would demand a form of government based on the involvement of citizens in the political process, while promoting governance that would not be based on oppression of the masses. A central question would thus be the balance between secularism and Islamism. The Kurds, it seems, would agree to accept a Sunni regime, on the condition of receiving autonomy – which for lack of alternatives and the limits of force, would likely be granted. If a secular regime with a democratic approach were to be established, this would make it easier to recruit the international community to participate in rehabilitating Syria's infrastructure and economy and rebuilding its institutions. Otherwise, Syria will continue to wallow in its problems, with no real solution.

- c. *A federal structure for Syria.* The idea of a federation arises periodically, when it becomes clear that there is no dominant group that can impose its authority and rule over Syria's main populated areas, and in light of the fact that different groups control different areas, with none capable of military victory. The idea rests on the organizing principle that preserves the state of Syria within its borders. This option could figure on the agenda if it receives a significant boost from the United States and Russia, especially considering the absence of alternatives to end the war. Russia has already hinted that it will promote the federal idea in order to guarantee its outposts on the Syrian coast. To this end, maintaining an Alawite province on the Syrian coast would be essential for Russia. The United States would be willing to accept this option in order not to close the door on the possibility of a unified Syria, and when it realizes that this is the scenario with the best chance of preventing the continued violence and murder of civilians. This option would also help the United States meet its commitments to the Kurds and provide them with expanded autonomy in a Kurdish province in northern Syria. However, it is more likely that the sub-state regions – provinces or cantons – would be established first, with a dominant power in each one, and only later would the nature of their relationship and the mechanism connecting them to a centralized government be determined.

The prevailing discourse in Syria reflects clear support for a unified Syria and rejects the idea of breaking it into pieces. Local players would only support it on the condition that the principle of “Syrian unity” be maintained, and that the federation would be shaped based on geography and not sect (community, ethnic group, religious group, or party), while taking into consideration the mixed population in urban areas (in any case, it is not very feasible to transfer populations on the basis of ethnic divisions). The prevailing assessment is that a federation, if and when it is established, would be unstable. Much depends on the way it is created, whether it would be shaped top-down or bottom-up.

- d. *The dissolution of Syria into autonomous units.* In the event of inability to agree on a ceasefire and transition to a political process for shaping Syria, it is possible that an interim situation (perhaps prolonged) could be created that would reflect the internal reality in Syria: internal and external recognition of the dissolution of Syria into new entities based on the relative strength of different groups, potentially according to ethnic group. Such a situation could constitute a preliminary stage toward a federal framework. Russia would have an essential role in implementing this scenario due to its relationship with the Alawite regime. It would act to maintain Alawite rule at least in the coastal region, and attempt to expand its rule along Syria’s backbone – the Aleppo-Damascus axis. It is likely that Russia would then aspire to reach bilateral understandings with each of the autonomous groups. At the same time, an attempt to divide Syria by ethnic provinces would be complex, if not impossible. Regarding the Alawite sect, for example, the Assad regime accelerated the process of urbanization and dispersal of Alawites in various urban centers. The two Assad presidents promoted the integration of Alawites alongside Muslims in Syria as a secular state. This created ethnic heterogeneity in the main cities and provinces.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are interested in a united Syria in order not to undermine the existing regional order and to maintain their influence. Therefore, they will not cooperate with an initiative to dismantle Syria, certainly if conditions essential for them are not met: Saudi Arabia seeks a special status for the Sunni population and significant reduction of the areas under Alawite control, while Iran would want to maintain the Assad

regime and the convenient access to Lebanon. The Syrian public still aspires to a united Syria, and there is a conceptual difficulty in separating populations that have belonged to the same state entity for nearly a century. Thus, it is likely that the forces opposed to partition would not accept this situation, even if defined as temporary (out of fears that temporary becomes permanent). That being said, fatigue, political deadlock, and even the balance of forces may lead to a partition situation that reflects the reality on the ground and the minimum goals of the local players. Achieving stability will require recognition (even if only *de facto*) of entities controlled by Salafi jihadist groups, alongside an effort to remove Islamist groups from the big cities. For their part, the Kurds are likely to work to achieve control of contiguous territory in northern Syria along the border with Turkey. Partition of Syria (whether by force or in practice) would make it difficult for the international community to formulate and apply a uniform approach to the state's rehabilitation and reconstruction. It will also likely be very difficult to implement a reconciliation process, due to concerns about the intensification of revenge campaigns based on ethnic and religious rivalries and sectarian clashes.

- e. *Deadlock: the de facto partition of Syria based on the situation on the ground.* This situation could emerge due to the inability of any side to achieve victory in the civil war, and agreement between the world and regional powers that a cessation of hostilities and recognition of the balance of forces on the ground and the groups in control of the different areas must come first, postponing the settlement. That said, in reality there is no such possibility as a "freeze frame," and developing dynamics create continuous changes, be they quick or gradual. As such, Russia is likely to accept a situation where it continues to retain its assets on the coast. In contrast, the United States would have difficulty accepting the partition of Syria due to the implications for Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. In this situation it is possible that a non-belligerency agreement could be forged between Assad and some of the rebel organizations cooperating with the West, under the mantle of cooperation between the powers for restricting the actions of the Salafi jihadist organizations
- f. *Continued fighting.* As time goes by, it becomes more likely that the current situation will continue, with the establishment of a new and united Syria

increasingly less likely. This is until the terrorism and violence reach a level where the world can no longer ignore the brutal acts of murder in Syria, or cope with additional masses of refugees arriving in Europe. At that time, it will attempt to impose an end to the war on the sides. The saddest part of the Syrian story is that many of the external players have an interest in the fighting in Syria continuing, with “bad guys killing bad guys.” A proxy campaign in which Sunnis fight against Shiites in Syria (and also in Yemen and Iraq), rather than in Riyadh, Tehran, or the Gulf, is more comfortable for the regional powers. Saudi Arabia and Turkey will not accept Iranian dominance in Syria, and vice versa. Likewise, the war in Syria is a warning by the Middle East regimes to their populations what may happen to them if they rise up. Continued fighting would require continued active and vigorous Russian-Iranian support for the Assad regime, and the support of Saudi Arabia and the Sunni countries for the rebel organizations, including the Salafi jihadist groups. The United States for its part would continue to focus on destroying the Islamic State and containing the desire of the regional players to exploit its removal for their own interests. To this end, it would need to expand its military involvement.

Strategic Factors

The scenarios outlined above point to five strategic factors that have significant influence over future developments in Syria:

The first factor concerns developments in the combat zone between the Assad regime and the rebels, and especially the results of the battle for Aleppo. The fall of the Aleppo-Idlib region into the hands of Assad’s forces could signify a victory for Assad over the rebels and create a sense of victory among the Syrian public – even if it does not bring about calm and stability – and the model of Afghanistan or Iraq could exist for a prolonged period. Alternatively, the success of the rebels in maintaining their outposts in northern Syria and paving an access route to the border with Turkey would signify a dead end and the continuation of the fighting.

The second factor is the scope and quality of Russian involvement in Syria and the depth of the cooperation between Russia and Iran. Developments in this context, in the form of the deployment of Russian fighter and bomber

aircraft squadrons in western Iran for a limited time period (in order to shorten the strike range to areas in Syria, including the areas under the control of the Islamic State), as well as Russia's announcement that it is willing to supply Iran with advanced S-400 air defense systems and Su-30 fighters, perhaps indicate what lies ahead. It appears that the close coordination between Russia and Iran has not prevented disagreements or Russian dissatisfaction with the performance of Iranian troops in ground combat. The Iranian leadership has also had difficulty explaining losses among its forces without clear results in the field, and has thus reduced the size of its forces in Syria.¹²

The third factor is the level of willingness among the various rebel organizations to join forces and create a critical mass to resist the Assad regime. Thus far, the rebel organizations have not succeeded in uniting on a wide scale, and are wasting their energy fighting one another. Nonetheless, it is possible that the establishment of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham will provide a wider basis for coordination between the organizations. Its leader, al-Julani, has suggested the creation of a joint rebel force that would fight against the Assad regime and thus foil the "Russian-American plot to keep him [Assad] in power."¹³ The question is what role organizations with a Salafi jihadist orientation can fill in a future arrangement.

The fourth factor is the regional dynamic: the Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia vs. the Shiite camp led by Iran, both of which seek to increase their influence in Syria. Within the Sunni camp, it is uncertain how much coordination and unity of purpose there is between Riyadh and Ankara. The effect of the coup attempt in Turkey and a series of actions by President Erdogan demonstrate his volatile policy: if he were to go one step further and join the Russian-Iranian coalition at the expense of his relations with the Sunni world, the United States, and his NATO allies, this would be a significant blow to the relative strength of the external forces who are involved in what is happening in Syria. This would be felt mainly in strengthening the rule of Assad and the ability to transfer supplies to rebel forces in northern Syria, in weakening the Kurdish force, and in reducing the impact of the Western coalition led by the United States.

The fifth parameter is a possible change in US policy under the new Trump administration. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has claimed that the next president must draw red lines for Putin, and that there

are two options: a serious deterioration in US-Russia relations, or the loss of American leadership in the world. Gates noted that since 1970 the United States has succeeded in distancing the Soviet Union, and later Russia, from the Middle East. The equation has now changed, and all of the serious decisions on the region will need to take Russia into account, which is increasing its involvement and driving a wedge between the United States and its allies in the Middle East.¹⁴ Trump's remarks before entering the White House suggest that he would be willing to give the "Syrian portfolio" to Russia and reduce the degree of US involvement in shaping the future of Syria.¹⁵

A Look at the Coming Year

In the near future, it is likely that the Syrian population will opt for any possible way to bring about a ceasefire in order to return to some semblance of normal life, although a political solution, even temporary, seems like a distant goal. Both inside and outside Syria, those who dreamt of a free, democratic, and liberal Syria connected to the West understand that this vision becomes less and less likely each day. Syria will not return to what it was, and the chances of any positive result emerging from the chaos are ebbing. The figures that could have been seen as legitimate rulers – both internal and external – have faded in the absence of effective political and military support from the United States, the West, and the Sunni Arab countries, while the policy of the pro-Assad coalition, led by Iran and Russia, is eroding the possibility of an alternative to Assad's rule.

In order for the rebels to serve as a significant and influential element in the future regime, they must first join forces against the Assad regime and the coalition supporting him. There are over 200 rebel organizations active in Syria, and their ability to take joint steps would be the first test of their maturity. Organizations coming together under the auspices of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham – formerly Jabhat al-Nusra – is more cosmetic than practical at this point. Nonetheless, Jabhat al-Nusra's freeing itself from affiliating with al-Qaeda have made Jabhat Fateh al-Sham a force that can cooperate with other organizations that are not Salafi jihadist, and even receive external assistance. Many rebel groups and local leaders have joined this umbrella organization not out of opposition to al-Qaeda's ideology, but because they see it as a practical alternative to the Assad regime. The organization is

organized and funded (by Saudi Arabia), well-equipped, and with far better performance levels than other rebel groups. However, a critical practical test facing the unified organization will be the ability to retain the Aleppo-Idlib region. The next test will be the need to convince the masses that its top priority is the welfare of Syria and its population, who are tired of Assad's tyrannical regime but concerned about the ideology and extreme behavior of the rebel factions.

In order for Syria to exist as a united single unit, with a legitimate and effective central government, all the armed groups and militias must be disarmed, and one government, one legal system, and one military must be established. Otherwise, stability will not be achieved and the civil war between different organizations and groups, as well as violent gangs that have gained significant strength during the war, will continue. It is hard to imagine the unification of all the streams, groups, and sects against the Salafi jihadist groups, as long as the Syrian people do not know the fate of the dictator they rose up against in the first place. In this context, how the rebel organizations will be integrated alongside the Syrian army and the bureaucracy that were loyal to Assad is critical in the transition process toward a future end state. In any case, it is essential to maintain the bureaucratic mechanisms of the state while dismantling the apparatus of oppression. It is necessary to start to create a mechanism that will enable discourse, understandings, and even compromises between the hawkish sides, while providing space for the population's participation in the political game.

President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have said that there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict.¹⁶ Russia and Iran, however, believe that a political arrangement will only be feasible after they have harmed the rebels severely, especially in the Aleppo region, and strengthened the Assad regime. The experience of the two collapsed ceasefires demonstrates that the United States can trust no one: not Russia, which has deceived it twice; not the Assad regime, which has not demonstrated commitment to international decisions and is not afraid to commit war crimes; not the "moderate" rebels, who are hard pressed to unite and are drawn toward Salafi jihadist groups. Nor can the US trust its allies in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who have no qualms about undermining American interests and

values. In the coming months the Trump administration will decide whether to change its policy.

The roadmap required for progress toward a functioning political entity in Syria must include a number of essential milestones. First, Assad must be removed from power, even at the price of leaving the Alawite government in place; second, true coordination between the United States and Russia is necessary, without mutual attempts to challenge one another; third, the Islamic State must be defeated, and Salafi jihadist groups must be dismantled such that they cannot serve as a governmental alternative that attracts the frustrated masses; fourth, the intervention of other countries in Syria – especially Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – must be reduced; fifth, an international program for rehabilitating Syria's economy and infrastructure and the conditions for a functioning society must be set up, with commitments received from all organizations not to undermine Syria's rehabilitation as a precondition for the program; and finally, all of the relevant parties, internal and external, must agree how to cleanse Syria of all the organizations that draw it toward violence and dangerous schisms, especially Salafi jihadist groups. The absence of these milestones means the continuation of Syria's chronic illness, with no way to heal it.

Implications for Israel

Throughout the war in Syria, Israel has maintained a wise and responsible policy of non-intervention, except when faced with tangible threats, including the transfer of advanced weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

This policy has reflected the thinking that Israel must see the Syrian arena through the prism of the external influences. In practice, Syria is divided internally and divided into zones of influence of external forces. The center and coast of Syria are under Russian influence, which overrides the Iranian influence, although the two countries are in coordination; northeast Syria, especially the Kurdish region, is, with American backing and assistance, close to achieving Kurdish autonomy; eastern Syria is the United States' main battleground against the Islamic State; and the central sector from Damascus to Homs and the Syria-Lebanon border are under Iranian influence, aided by Hezbollah. What remains is southern Syria, including the Golan Heights sector, where a status quo has been maintained for a long time. It is essential

for Israel to maintain operational freedom in this region and in Lebanon, and thus Israel has fostered operational coordination with Russia as to air activity there. Regarding the situation on the ground in southern Syria, it is important that Israel broaden its coordination with Jordan, to the point of cooperation by aiding, albeit with a low profile, the Free Syrian Army, the main rebel organization in this area. At the same time, it is important that Israel develop and expand its leverage with local communities, especially in the Syrian Golan Heights, through economic, security, and humanitarian assistance to those interested in a connection with Israel.

In parallel, Israel should prepare for a scenario in which Iran benefits from the war in Syria, especially if the Assad regime survives and the new US administration will withdraw from shaping the future of Syria. Under such circumstances, Iranian influence in Syria would increase, enabling Iran operational freedom and easy access to Syria and Lebanon. Iran is seen by Russia, and even by the international community, as a responsible actor that can contribute to stability and order in Syria, and it will therefore be included in future agreements. Nonetheless, Israel would have difficulty accepting the presence of Iranian forces and Hezbollah in the Golan Heights, and if there are developments in this direction, Israel will need to reconsider its policy of non-intervention in Syria. It is possible that understandings can be reached via the Russian channel regarding the rules of the game vis-à-vis the Iran-Assad-Hezbollah axis.

It appears that in the near future, the world will need to learn to live with the Syrian syndrome and abandon the belief in complete solutions for Syria's international and domestic problems. Instead, there should be efforts to manage risks with a flexible approach and tools for damage control. This conclusion emerges against the background of the growing understanding that artificial solutions in the form of formal arrangements imposed by external actors, which were relatively easy to implement in the previous century – such as the Sykes-Picot agreement – are no longer valid. Syria serves as a field where the rules of the game are not clear to many of the numerous actors, both internal and external, that are driven by contradictory rationales. In this reality there is no point in looking for magic solutions or long term arrangements; rather, the ongoing focus must be on events, processes, trends, and opportunities, in order to formulate policies that can

provide optimal solutions in the short term. The respective actors respond variously to changing influences and rationales, such that it is difficult to identify congruent interests and goals over time. In addition, the zeitgeist, which shapes the dynamic nature of events, demands the creation of tools that enable high levels of vigilance, preparedness, and flexibility, while maintaining perseverance and recognizing that the results of processes will not always be unequivocal or known in advance.

Notes

- 1 Colum Lynch, "Why Putin Is So Committed to Keeping Assad in Power," *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/07/putins-russia-is-wedded-to-bashar-al-assad-syria-moscow/>.
- 2 Fabrice Balanche, "Ceasefire and Elections in Syria: Putin Still a Step Ahead," *Policy Watch* 2569, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 23, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ceasefire-and-elections-in-syria-putin-still-a-step-ahead>.
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