

The War in Syria: What Lies Ahead?

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Six years into Syria's bloody civil war, the conclusion of the war is still a long way off. Bashar al-Assad's December 2016 conquest of Aleppo – the country's second largest city – with Russian and Iranian support was a significant achievement in the campaign against his rivals.¹ For Assad, however, victory remains beyond reach, at least for now. The embers of protest and rebellion continue to burn and may once again flare up to the point of posing a threat to the regime in Damascus, particularly if the United States decides to deepen its involvement in the crisis in Syria. Hence Moscow's efforts to promote a political settlement in conjunction with Iran, Turkey, and in the future, possibly also Washington, and in this framework establish protected zones (areas of de-escalation) in Syria and perhaps even divide the country into regions of influence among the different regional and international actors. Such a process, the Russians hope, will enable them to extricate themselves from the Syrian entanglement after achieving half of their aim – preserving Assad's rule or securing a replacement that is acceptable to Moscow, albeit within only part of the Syrian state.

The military achievements of the Syrian regime during the final months of 2016, and the United States' deepening involvement in the crisis, especially if it intensifies, reinforce the impression that in the months and years to come, the war in Syria will continue at low intensity, particularly in the friction-laden areas between the territories under the regime's control and the territory under rebel control in the western part of the country (continued hostilities). At most, it will be possible to achieve a weak settlement based on the current map of the country, which is split between rival forces (de facto partition of the country). However, it is not impossible that in the long run, it will be the Syrian regime, under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad

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or a replacement found for him that will ultimately emerge from war with the upper hand and once again rule Syria (decision and victory).

The War in Syria: Protest, Revolution, Civilians, and Jihad

Since it erupted in March 2011, the civil war in Syria has seen ups and downs, as well as a dramatic turning point. At times it appeared that Assad's defeat was a *fait accompli*, and that his fall was days or at most only a few weeks away. At other times, it seemed as if he was only a step away from achieving decision and victory.

In retrospect, it is clear that until the Russians and the Iranians arrived in September 2015 to fight on Syrian soil, the war was moving in only one direction – in favor of the rebels and against the regime.² Assad's army was exhausted and weakened, and lacked the requisite reserves to fight the rebels, let alone defeat them. The Russian and Iranian involvement in the fighting, however, changed this trend. The "Chechen model" that the Russians employed in Syria – involving the air and artillery bombardment of large areas with the aim of breaking the unity and the fighting spirit of the rebels and of deterring, and perhaps even driving away the civilian population supporting them – enabled the regime and its allies to take the initiative and seize control of a number of outposts and key positions in northern, central, and southern Syria.³

To pursue this course of action, the Russians needed a few dozen planes and combat helicopters and tens of thousands of Iranian soldiers, Hezbollah fighters, and Shiite volunteers, who were recruited by Iran from throughout the Middle East and engaged in ground warfare as the air effort proceeded. Unlike the rebels, the regime forces, and particularly the Russians, conducted their fighting in accordance with a comprehensive strategic view and with the ability to transport troops and employ air forces. This enabled them to win battle after battle and to achieve decision at specific locations – a success that was primarily concerned with breaking the momentum of the rebels and eroding their achievements.⁴ In tandem, the inaction of the Obama administration deprived the rebels of the hope for a victory aided by the Western powers.⁵ However, it also became evident to the Russians that the forces they had sent to Syria would not be sufficient to achieve a quick decision in the war.⁶

Every attempt to analyze the course of the war in Syria and to anticipate what may happen in the future must take into account two fundamental and contradictory aspects of the situation. On the one hand is the steadfastness

of the Syrian state system under the leadership of Bashar al-Assad – the man, the dynasty, and the members of the Alawite sect whom he represents, as well as other elements within Syrian society that constitute the basis of the regime (members of minority religious sects, and Sunni elites and members of the middle class) and the institutions of the Syrian state, led by the army and the government and security agencies. This state system has displayed surprising and noteworthy strength and resilience. Rather than collapse, as it did in Libya and Yemen, it has continued to function, albeit in a limited capacity and with the ever increasing assistance of Iran and Russia. More importantly, these elements continue to constitute a core for possible recovery and the reestablishment of the Syrian state at the end of the war.

As a result of its military successes in the course of 2016, the Syrian regime now controls one quarter of the area of the country. The area in question is known as “vital Syria” or “useful Syria” (*suriya al-mufida*), and includes all of its important regions: the strip connecting Daraa in the south to the capital city of Damascus, the cities of Hama and Homs in central Syria; Aleppo in the north, and the coastal area – the stronghold of the Alawites. This strip is home to more than half of the state’s original population (approximately 13 million out of a total population of 25 million), and Syrian state institutions continue to operate there. The state continues to pay the salaries of its employees and to maintain (albeit with difficulty) a functioning framework for education and health systems, and most importantly, for the supply of food and essential provisions. In addition to its military successes, the Syrian regime has managed to achieve a valuable demographic victory: the intentional and systematic “ethnic purification” or “cleansing” of Syria of approximately one third of its population, the vast majority of whom are Sunni Muslims from rural areas and the periphery, the principal home of the rebels and where the rebellion erupted.⁷ Some 19 million inhabitants, and perhaps even fewer, remain in Syria as a whole, with Sunni Muslims accounting for approximately half, as opposed to 70 percent of the population prior to the eruption of hostilities. As a result, the Alawites and members of other minority groups such as Druze, Kurds, and Christians are in a decisive demographic position.

Along with the consolidation of the regime in western Syria, the Islamic State has been marginalized and has lost many of its strongholds in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. It may manage to continue operating as an active guerilla group in the heart of the Syrian and Iraqi desert from which it

emerged (like its offshoot in the Sinai Peninsula), but its attempt to establish a functioning political entity appears to have failed. The question that remains is whether its territory in Syria, around the cities of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour and in the Syrian desert, will fall into the hands of the Sunni Arab rebels, who enjoy Turkish support, or those of the Syrian regime or Shiite militias operating under Iranian patronage. Tehran aspires to establish a land corridor from Tehran to Damascus and Beirut, by means of Baghdad and eastern Syria. In June 2017, the Americans repeatedly attacked advanced forces of Shiite militias and the Syrian army attempting to seize control of parts of the Syrian desert up to the border with Iraq, beyond which pro-Iranian Shiite militias are located. Perhaps the Kurds (the Kurdish Democratic Union Party), who receive US aid but maintain an open channel of communication with Moscow and Damascus, will be the ones to succeed the Islamic State.⁸ Incidentally, the Kurds have proven able to establish an autonomous framework in northern Syria. However, in light of the regional and international circumstances – i.e., Turkish and Iranian resolve to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraq or Syria – it is unclear whether they will be able to continue to maintain this entity in isolation from the Syrian state, in the event that the latter manages to get back on its feet.⁹

On the other hand, against the ongoing vitality of the regime is the intensity of the protest and the rebellion, which has proven to be deeply rooted and widespread. The rebel camp relies on the extensive support of significant portions of the country's Sunni population. This support is nurtured by hidden but entrenched feelings of hatred and vengeance against the Alawite hegemony in the state; by the desire for revenge against the regime's attempt to use force to suppress the rebellion; and finally, by the religious radicalization that has transformed significant segments of the Sunni population in Syria in the shadow of the recent developments in the country, and that may even have started prior to their onset.

The rebels are still active in almost all parts of Syria and continue to attack straggling forces of the Syrian regime and inflict painful blows.¹⁰ They are also continuing to maintain a presence in the areas around the capital city of Damascus, in the south and north of the country, around Hama and Homs, and north of Aleppo. The Idlib stronghold in northern Syria remains under their control, as do considerable portions of the country's eastern region (the Jazeera region). They continue to enjoy Turkish patronage, although only in northern Syria, and in the future may earn Jordanian

patronage in southern Syria.¹¹ The turn in American policy implemented by the Trump administration has provided them, for the first time in years, with the hope of not only surviving the war but perhaps also of receiving substantial American military aid in their struggle against the regime. However, their weak point remains their inability to unify their ranks and develop an effective political and military leadership, as well as their continually intensifying dependence on external aid.

Examination of the different fronts in the war reveals that close to 300,000 fighters are operating on the side of the regime. They include 125,000 soldiers of the Syrian army or what remains of it, another 100,000 fighters belonging to local militias that have been recruited from the elements of Syrian society that support the regime, Alawites and Druze alike, and close to 50,000 foreign fighters: members of Hezbollah, fighters of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and Shiite volunteers that were recruited by Iran in neighboring Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This is an impressive number on paper, but only some actually belong to the combat echelons (as opposed to the logistical and administrative echelons), and they are spread throughout the country as garrison forces, lack mobility, and most significantly, do not possess sufficient manpower to defend the territory they hold, not to mention to defeat their opponents.

The rebels have close to 150,000 people fighting on their side in numerous separate groups. Approximately 90,000 rebels belong to large radical Salafists fighting forces such as the Fateh al-Sham Front (formerly the al-Nusra Front), Ahrar al-Sham, and Jaysh al-Islam. Half, and perhaps even more today, are concentrated in the Idlib province, and the rest are scattered among the Damascus region, southern and central Syria, and around Homs and Hama. A few thousand rebels belong to a few dozen smaller radical groups. The rest of the rebels belong to a few hundred local groups, some of which were set up on a local basis and are actually tribal militias or militias defending the villages or towns of their members. Some have recently devoted themselves to the Syrian regime or, alternatively, abandoned the areas in which they reside and moved to the Idlib province, which is under rebel control. This province may become either a graveyard of the revolution or a starting point for its renewed conflagration by means of rebellion, like the Kandahar province in Afghanistan. Also significant are the approximately 30,000 Kurdish fighters in Syria (Syrian Democratic Forces) who do not constitute an integral part of the rebel camp and are not fighting the army of the regime at all. Finally, there is the Islamic State,

whose ranks consist of a few tens of thousand of fighters operating primarily in eastern Syria and northern Iraq.¹²

Two conclusions emerge from this survey. The first is that after six years of bloodshed, neither of the sides fighting in Syria possesses the ability to defeat its adversaries on its own, achieve victory, and bring the war to an end. Both sides are exhausted, lack strength, and find it difficult to simply remain standing. Between these two camps stand most of the Syrian population – that is, those who still remain in the country. This population has displayed indifference and is concerned only with their daily struggle to survive and ensure a basic existence for themselves, their families, and their communities. The second conclusion is that the war in Syria is no longer a war of the Syrians alone. The involvement of foreign forces in the fighting is now fueling it and causing it to continue, and may also determine its outcome. This explains why the involvement of the Russians and the Iranians proved to be so influential and why the possible intervention of Washington in the future could counterbalance this intervention.

This situation invites speculation regarding the way the war in Syria is liable to end and the future that can be anticipated for the country:

- a. *Decision and victory.* In this scenario, the Syrian regime survives the war and emerges from it with the upper hand, or at least maintains stable control over the core of the Syrian state: the strip stretching from Damascus northward to Aleppo, and from there to the Syrian coast. The rebel camp is marginalized, loses its external sources of support, and disintegrates until it ceases to constitute a force of significance and political and military influence. Such a success would allow Bashar al-Assad and his regime, when the time is right, to reestablish control over the territory of the state. This process would take a number of years, as the regime would require time to build up strength and, most importantly, recruit the manpower reserves it currently lacks. Presumably many of the refugees that have fled Syria will not return to the country, which means that the remaining population is likely to be more compact and easier for Assad to control – both in terms of its sectoral make-up and its socioeconomic character. This scenario is of course based on the assumption that Russia and Iran continue to throw all its weight behind Bashar al-Assad's regime, while the United States continues resolutely to denounce him but remains hesitant to translate this position into action, keeping its moves focused and geographically isolated in the

country's eastern region (the Jazeera region and the Syrian desert), in the name of its fight against the Islamic State.

- b. *Continued hostilities.* Without a decision the fighting in Syria will drag on and continue to destroy the country, even though Assad continues, under Russian and Iranian patronage, to maintain control of parts of the core of Syria, home to most of the population. This control, however, will continue to be weak and fragile, and threatened by the occasional but never-ending blows inflicted by rebel groups. These groups will continue to operate on the fringes of the regions under Assad's control and maintain a presence in the rural and peripheral regions located far out of the regime's reach. The rebellion and protest will therefore continue to burn as an ember that could easily be ignited and engulf Syria as a whole. The solution that the Russians are attempting to advance may result in such a scenario, as the protected zones in which the rebels are concentrated are liable to turn into centers of resistance to the regime.
- c. *De-facto partition of the country.* As part of a settlement supported by all the involved regional and international actors, Syria will be divided into zones in which these actors maintain presence, influence, and control. The east (the Jazeera region and the Syrian desert) will constitute a Kurdish and Sunni Arab region under American patronage. The north will constitute a Sunni Arab region under Turkish patronage. The western part of the country will be under the control of the regime under Russian patronage with an Iranian presence. And the south will be a Sunni-Arab region under Jordanian and American patronage. Such a division may result in Syria's transformation into a weak federation of autonomous regions, which will be able to continue to exist as long as they contain a foreign presence and continue to enjoy external support. On the other hand, Syria's partition into state entities of sectoral character will be difficult to implement. Most regions of the country are home to a mixed population, and this is certainly true of the important urban centers: Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. In addition, the areas inhabited by a few sects in Syria, such as the Druze Mountain and the Alawite mountains, lack the capacity for independent existence – particularly on an economic level.
- d. *Collapse of the regime and the state system and seizure of the state's territory by rebel groups.* This scenario, which appears unrealistic today, could nonetheless materialize if the United States deepens its involvement in Syria, and in light of the fact that the Syrian regime continues to bleed,

is exhausted, and lacks the manpower reserves necessary to defeat its opponents. The collapse of the Syrian state would lead to power struggles between the different rebel groups, and in the immediate term the groups that are Islamic in character would enjoy the upper hand. Although not certain, the urban Sunni element – the middle class and the elites in the major cities – would hopefully succeed, in the distant future, in reestablishing a Syrian state entity and containing the different rebel groups within it.

At this juncture, a resolution of the Syrian crisis through peaceful means, as opposed to a compromise settlement that the Russians are likely to attempt to concoct that will amount to the almost complete surrender of the rebels, does not appear to be a realistic possibility. The rebels will presumably refuse to integrate into a state system under Assad's authority, and Assad, for his part, will likely not agree to any arrangement that will endanger the future of his rule and the rule of the dynasty he leads. After all, Assad did not drag his country through six long years of war and bloodshed, and cleanse the country of approximately one third of its population, only to be defeated in democratic elections.

In conclusion, after six bloody years, little remains of the Syria over which Assad and his adversaries have been fighting.¹³ The conquest of Aleppo in December 2016 was ostensibly a turning point in the battle for "vital Syria," which was supposed to herald Assad's victory in his battle for survival. However, it has again become clear that the war has a dynamic of its own, and that currently hanging in the balance are not only the fate of Bashar al-Assad, his regime, and the Syrian state, but also the outcome of the struggle for regional hegemony waged by Iran and the Sunni camp under Turkish and Saudi leadership. Also at stake is the fate of two parallel and ostensibly contradictory processes that have been initiated by Putin and Trump: restoring Russia and the United States to their former glory in the regional and global arena.

The war is likely to continue for some time, and the currently unrealistic scenario of the regime's collapse and rebel victory cannot be ruled out. Deepening US military intervention in Syria, or, alternatively, Assad's unnatural departure from the arena, could fundamentally change the reality in Syria. However, in the course of 2016, and especially during the final months of the year, luck was on the side of Bashar al-Assad – whom many were quick to eulogize at the outset of the rebellion.

The developments in Syria suggest, therefore, that the war in Syria will continue without decision into the foreseeable future, and that the country will continue to constitute a focal point of instability for the region as a whole (the continued hostilities scenario). In an effort to contain the crisis, a settlement could be advanced that divides Syria among the fighting parties and their patrons from abroad (de facto partition of the country). However, in the long run, Bashar al-Assad may survive the war, emerge with an upper hand, and maintain secure control over the core of the country. If that occurs, all that will remain will be to wait and see whether this core can ultimately serve as a basis for renewed growth of a Syrian entity similar to what collapsed upon the outbreak of the Syrian war in the spring of 2011 (the decision and victory scenario).

Notes

- 1 On the significance of the fall of Aleppo, see Taylor Luck, "Fall of Aleppo Could Tip Syria from Civil War to Insurgency," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 14, 2016, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2016/1214/Fall-of-Aleppo-could-tip-Syria-from-civil-war-to-insurgency>.
- 2 See Eyal Zisser, "Bashar al-Assad's Struggle for Survival: Has the Miracle Occurred?" *Strategic Assessment* 18, no.3 (2015): 33-43, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/bashar-al-assads-struggle-for-survival-has-the-miracle-occurred/>.
- 3 For more on this, see Eyal Zisser, "Russia's War in Syria," *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 1 (2016): 41-49, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/russias-war-in-syria/?offset=2&posts=20&type=401>.
- 4 For more, see Amos Yadlin, "Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel," *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 2 (2016): 9-26, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/russia-in-syria-and-the-implications-for-israel/?offset=&posts=20&type=401>.
- 5 See the remarks of President Obama at his final press conference at the White House, in which he explained that such involvement in Syria would require "putting large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground uninvited, without any international law mandate, without sufficient support from Congress, at a time when we still had troops in Afghanistan and we still had troops in Iraq and we had just gone through over a decade of war and spent trillions of dollars." See "Obama's End-of-Year News Conference on Syria, Russian Hacking and More," *Washington Post*, December 16 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/12/16/transcript-obamas-end-of-year-news-conference-on-syria-russian-hacking-and-more/?utm_term=.1f7ad96435ed.
- 6 Following the chemical attack perpetrated by Syria in early April 2017 in the northern Syrian town of Khan Shaykhun, a senior IDF officer noted that the "sarin attack reflected Assad's frustration and immense troubles,

and the lack of a desire to maneuver on the ground in Syria [i.e., to use ground forces on a large scale] – on the part of Hezbollah, the Russians, and the Iranians... [In such a situation,] I see no way of achieving decision or a settlement in Syria.” See Yoav Zeitun, “Senior IDF Officer: Iran has Lost its Hegemony in Syria,” *Ynet*, April 19, 2017, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4950997,00.html>.

- 7 See Fabrice Balanche, “Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria’s Unity,” *PolicyWatch* 2528, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 3, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ethnic-cleansing-threatens-syrias-unity>.
- 8 See Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Uncertain U.S. ‘Game Changers’ in the ISIS, Iraq, and Syria War,” CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies), July 28, 2015, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/uncertain-us-%E2%80%9Cgame-changers%E2%80%9Disis-iraq-and-syria-war>.
- 9 See Orit Perlov and Gallia Lindenstrauss, “Syria’s Civil War: Kurdish Success, Turkish Dilemma,” *INSS Insight* No. 827, June 9, 2016, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=11909>.
- 10 See “Syria’s War: Suicide Attacks Hit Military in Homs,” *al-Jazeera*, February 17, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/02/syria-war-suicide-attacks-hit-military-homs-170225071514428.html>.
- 11 See Ofek Ish Maas and Carmit Valensi, “The Agreement on De-escalation Zones in Syria: Risks to Israel, with Opportunities for Influence,” *INSS Insight* No. 929, May 15, 2017, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/agreement-de-escalation-zones-syria-risks-israel-opportunities-influence/?offset=4&posts=941&type=399>.
- 12 See Fabrice Balanche, “Status of the Syrian Rebellion: Numbers, Ideologies, and Prospects,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *PolicyWatch* 2727, November 22, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/status-of-the-syrian-rebellion-numbers-ideologies-and-prospects>.
- 13 See Eran Yashiv, “The Economic Devastation of Syria: Strategic Implications,” *INSS Insight* No. 850, August 29, 2016, http://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-economic-devastation-of-syria-strategic-implications/?offset=125&posts=132&from_date=09-08-2016.