



***INSS Insight* No. 754, October 13, 2015**

Farewell to Syria

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The civil war in Syria is at the top of the global agenda for two primary reasons. The first is related to Russia's military presence in the country, which until a few weeks ago was marginal and of a low profile, and became substantial once Russia dispatched dozens of fighter jets and helicopters, hundreds of soldiers, and a defense system for deployment on Syrian soil. Russian President Vladimir Putin has openly stated that the move has three objectives: to help the Assad regime survive, to attack the Islamic State, and to eliminate Russian Islamic radicals fighting in the ranks of the Islamic State. The second reason is related to the massive influx of refugees into Europe, a phenomenon forcing European leaders to stop turning a blind eye to the longstanding civil war.

Although restoring stability to Syria is an urgent interest of all parties involved, the response of the leading nations in the international arena to the bloodbath in Syria over the last four years has been limited to condemnations and efforts to avoid direct involvement in events, even though it was clear from the outset that the effects of the civil war could not be contained within Syria. The local instability spills over to neighboring countries, with the refugees fleeing to Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Now Europe too is trying to cope with the masses of Syrian refugees at its doorstep. This pressure will only mount, given the huge number of Syrian civilians fleeing the war zones. Of the 10 million Syrian refugees, about one third have left the country, and current estimates are that some 70,000-100,000 refugees flee Syria every month.

In face of Russia's strong presence in Syria, attempts are now underway to formulate a solution acceptable to all the large powers. Reuters, citing US Secretary of State John Kerry, reported (September 29, 2015) that the United States and Russia had formulated fundamental principles on the future of Syria, and that Moscow and Washington agreed that Syria must remain united, secular, and at war with the Islamic State. The report also cited White House sources saying that the option of Assad continuing to rule was not practical. It seems that the West continues to pursue ideas lacking viability.

All efforts toward a solution to the Syrian crisis must acknowledge that the Syria of 2010, a sovereign nation with internationally recognized borders, no longer exists. A sovereign state with an effective central government will not be established in the area recognized as Syria any time soon. The drive of some in the international community to turn the clock back and stabilize the “old” Syria under a new government has no political or strategic feasibility. Any strategy formulated with the goal of stopping the civil war in Syria and shaping its future must have a clear starting assumption: the collapsed, divided Syria cannot be pieced together. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on identifying practical alternatives to the Syrian state and formulate a viable basic plan acceptable to the leaders in the regional and global systems.

In the course of the civil war, Syria was de facto divided into zones of control, primarily along demographic lines. The internal flow of refugees and residents has streamed toward ethnic and religious centers where civilians feel safe. Although interests within the ethnic groups do not converge entirely, in practice there is a clear division into relatively homogeneous demographic spheres. Under these circumstances, it seems that a de jure division of Syria into several ethno-religious state entities is the most natural move – not least because this has a real chance of helping stabilize the arena and stop the war.

The Sunni majority controls – and will continue to control – most of the Syrian territory. At the same time, the safety of minority groups will be ensured by international and regional guarantees. The land of Syria is home to three large minority groups in clearly distinguishable areas: the Alawites in the West, along the coast; the Druze, mostly in the Druze mountains north of Jordan; and the Kurds in the north on the Turkish border. A framework for a settlement in Syria must be based on ensuring the existence of these communities in state entities of their own. Adopting the framework would also serve as leverage in confronting the Islamic State and other radical Islamist organizations.

Assad’s role in any future settlement is the bone of contention between Russia and the West. The West insists on Assad stepping down, whereas Russia sees him as someone who would support its interests in the region. Assad’s continued control of only the Alawite area would presumably temper the West’s opposition to him while also allow Russia to maintain its interests on the coast (Tartus and Latakia) and continue the war against the Islamic State. Indeed, for Russia and Iran, continued warfare and further involvement endangers their strongholds in Syria, and their interests are better served through their ties with the Alawite entity.

Despite the widespread international consternation at the thought of Syria’s collapse and division into several state entities, it is also possible that the entities would (though not necessarily) have a federal or confederate structure. The proposed settlement helps reduce friction between the groups, ease the threat of ongoing civil war, and provide protection

to the minorities against radical Islamist forces, including the Islamic State. Another result of stabilizing the arena in this manner would be an end to the negative effects of the war in Syria on neighboring countries, including extreme Islamist radicalization in the region, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon.

The proposed arrangement has roots in Syrian history. During its mandatory rule of the Levant, France envisioned five semi-state units for the territory of Syria that could form a future sovereign state. The Druze and Alawite autonomous regions were based on an ethnic demographic factor. Four of the five units were created in September 1920. The Jabal al-Druze (Druze Mountain) State was created two years later. The Christian area subsequently became Lebanon, and the Turkish minority in the Iskenderun region was annexed by Turkey in 1939. The original French principle linked the state structure to the desire to protect the minorities.

In late 2013, the Syrian Kurds announced the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish province; they published a draft constitution and called for parliamentary elections. Today, the Kurdish fear – and the Druze fear as well – centers on the threat posed by the Islamic State and other extremist Sunni organizations. The Kurdish national project in Syria is linked to the Kurdish minority in both Iraq and Turkey, as well as to the notion of constructing an independent national home in all of greater Kurdistan. Therefore, Turkey's consent to a settlement that would include a Kurdish state entity on Syrian soil would be no small matter. It may be that a clarification by the world powers that the Kurdish entity would not be expanded beyond the Syrian border could help mitigate the expected Turkish opposition.

The national aspirations of the Druze are apparently more modest than those of the Kurds. They are mainly interested in survival per se. Given the situation, however, Druze autonomy in southern Syria (of the type enjoyed during the French mandate, which was withdrawn on the eve of Syria's political independence) could be welcomed by the Druze as part of the proposal. Regional and international elements can likely be found to support such an entity because it would also function as a barrier between Jordan to the south and the radical Sunni system in central Syria.

As long as the principal actors in the international arena adhere to the futile notion of a secular state in Syria under a single central government, it will be impossible to advance any resolution. In fact, after four years of a horrendous civil war, with 250,000 dead, 10 million refugees, the destabilization of Lebanon and Jordan, and the danger of military clashes between the superpowers in the skies over Syria, all sides have an incentive to change direction. Given the ongoing military stalemate, all sides may conclude that the division of Syria could allow them to preserve their basic interests and save them from continuing to pay the unbearable price they are currently paying.

Persistent warfare in Syria means more bloodshed, refugees, and terrorism, and a greater threat of the radical Sunni camp seizing full control of the entire Syrian territory. By contrast, a coordinated and orderly settlement aimed at a separation of forces between the Sunni majority and the minorities living on Syrian soil, carried out with international backing and leadership, seems like the right solution, as it has the highest potential for stability.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the Levant into states almost one hundred years ago, was not notable for its close adherence to demographic identities and rationales. The time has come to depart from this heritage, at least in Syria. Reality has already done so. Now it is the statesmen's turn.

