

The Syrian chessboard

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE AFTER SIX YEARS OF CARNAGE



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Six years have passed since peaceful protests in Damascus and Deraa started a bloody conflict in Syria, interpreted as a part of the "Arab Spring" domino. In 2017, after the fall of Aleppo, with five million Syrians who left their country, six million internal refugees, and the hard-to-estimate, real number of victims - perhaps 400,000 or more - peace remains a distant dream. Regional powers: Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as Russia and the United States - with their military intervention or financial backing - have made Syria a chessboard of their competition and 'core' interests. Meanwhile, the divided country has become a safe haven and a strategic battleground for the global jihadism. This is a tragic fate Syria shares with another failed state: Iraq.

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US dilemmas in Syria

American strategy with regard to Syria and Assad has changed gradually, but significantly since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. The new Trump administration - in line with its pre-election promises - is mainly focused on anti-terrorism, and its post-war scenarios for Syria are little known - if there are any. Accordingly, the main objective for the US remains defeating ISIL - the Islamic State, and the Hay'at Tahrir ash-Sham coalition (a new grouping under the leadership of the former Nusra Front, once allied with ISIL and Al Qaeda). President Trump wants Syria to cease being a safe haven and training camp for global terrorism. Other US plans include creating 'safe zones' for civilians so that they no longer seek refuge outside of Syria. Such 'zones', however, would have to be established in northern Syria on territories currently under Turkish control, or in Kurdish cantons - but the latter is not to be expected even if many Syrians have found their refuge in Rojava. Another solution (with stabilization zones in areas of conflict) would require serious involvement of the US Army or the Turkish forces (TSK), and

it seems unrealistic. Likewise, achieving the same result: security, through local cease-fires or no-fly zones doesn't appear feasible. So far, the relocation of civilians (and militants) from areas besieged by Syrian government troops has been carried out in al-Wa'er, a rebel-held district of Homs, which - under the deal guaranteed by the Russians - had to be left by rebel troops and their supporters with families. The resettlement occurs into the vicinity of Jarabulus, a town near the Syrian-Turkish border. Analogous deals were reached in the outskirts of Damascus, and in towns and villages besieged by rebels in Idlib province.¹ Such relocations, however, smack of ethno-religious cleansing, and they are shaping a new, post-war map of Syria.

After the latest chemical attack in Idlib province, US President, Donald Trump, seemed to have changed his stance on the Assad regime. On April 7, two American

¹ Syria evacuations resume, bringing Damascus-area town under state control
<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-evacuation-idUKKBN17L0L6>

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warships fired a series of 59 Tomahawk missiles, destroying some 20 aircraft and damaging infrastructure at the Shayrat airfield near Homs, from which the chemical attack had occurred. Few days later, the United States ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley took a firm stand, saying that the US did not see the future for Assad in Damascus. Meanwhile, the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sent contradictory messages on Syria.² Then, however, President Trump confirmed that defeating of the so-called Islamic State remains the priority of his administration.³

Probably, the April 7 Tomahawk strike was meant as a one-off demonstration of force and a signal of resolve to the Syrian and Russian governments as well as China and North Korea. It looked also like a part of

Trump's international PR effort and Washington's internal political game.

No Light at the End of the Tunnel

As the Syria civil war enters its seventh year, it seems clear that neither side is able to completely overpower their opponents. The Assad government, despite a massive backing from Russia and Iran as well as its allies: Hezbollah and Shi'ite militants from Iraq and Afghanistan, has almost no chances to recapture the whole of Syria. This was demonstrated by recent, unexpected offensives of rebels in the northern Hama province, in eastern outskirts of Damascus (Eastern Ghouta), as well as in Deraa.

The regime in Damascus has been fighting for six years now on several fronts; it has been suffering from lack of recruits (officially admitted by Assad in the summer of 2015), and according to some estimates the role of regime's army consists more of logistics, command, training, and provision of weapons, ammunition and equipment rather than being a regular armed force. No radical breakthrough should be expected in this respect. A large part of military and

² Lavrov says Russia, U.S. agree U.S. strikes on Syria should not be repeated: Interfax <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-usa-idUSKBN17F29U>

³ Trump's policy on Syria emerges after he ordered a military strike on the Assad regime <http://www.businessinsider.com/trumps-policy-on-syria-emerges-after-he-ordered-a-military-strike-on-the-assad-regime-2017-4?IR=T>

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retaliatory operations has been carried out by Shi'ite militias - local or foreign armed groups controlled by the government, although this subordination is often illusory.

The picture of the Syria war is very chaotic and it escapes clear definition. Religious affiliations mingle with tribal, clan, ethnic and local ones, and often oppose each other. The officer corps of Assad's army consists largely of Alawites, who have their strongholds in north-western Syria. However, the Alawites, after six years of bleeding, are reluctant to sacrifice their sons to fighting; though, in their belief, this is a war for the survival of the Alawites in Syria. And that is one of the main motivations for the Alawite leaders, but for many ordinary Alawites - this is an obligation imposed on them.

A party to the conflict that both the West and Turkey hoped would overthrow the Assad regime, is the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA): various, more or less moderate rebel groups, also supported by the Gulf States. Their area of operation has been severely limited as a result of the devastating Russian intervention in Syria in September 2015. Moreover, these units are less

determined, motivated and organized than Islamist groups. The term "moderate" needs to be clarified: the Syrians themselves argue that the FSA are moderate as for the Middle East standards. In Europe, they could be labelled as 'extremist'. The most significant territory shared by various rebel forces and militias is the Idlib province, and border areas near Turkey, north of al-Bab. Frequently, moderate rebel groups join forces with jihadists in various areas, most recently in the eastern suburbs of Damascus, and in the northern Hama province.

The problem the Americans and their allies will be faced with quite soon is: how to deal with groups like Ahrar ash-Sham, not to mention Hay'at Tahrir as-Sham (its core is formed by the former Nusra Front)? Quite often, tribal loyalty, safety concerns and financial considerations are decisive for militants' affiliation. Hay'at Tahrir is an extremist group, however, less radical than ISIL. Ahrar ash-Sham has gone through a transformation but it is still an Islamist group, though relatively "moderate" - taking into account conditions of the civil war in Syria. It's more oriented towards political Islam but, in the eyes of many Syrians, its

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leaders might accept a possible "secular" constitution of the new Syria, if rooted somehow in Islam. Egypt might be a model - definitely, not as to how the country is governed by president Sisi - but to the relationship: state-Islam-society. This, however, can not be said about the new incarnation of the Nusra Front, or Hay'at Tahrir ash-Sham. No agreement, no postwar arrangement between these armed groups and the regime in Damascus is possible.

Turkey - Rojava faultlines

Turkey has not only provided generous assistance to refugees (at least three million Syrians), but also used the refugee crisis as a tool to exert pressure on Europe to take the accession negotiations more seriously. The refugee crisis of 2015 and the waves of refugees heading via the Balkans towards Germany and Scandinavia would not have reached their proportions without a quiet but active involvement of Turkish authorities. President Erdoğan had tried to "soften" the European Union and then agreed to stop refugees in return for visa-free travel within the Schengen zone as well as speeding up accession negotiations with the EU. From

the beginning, however, it was quite clear that that deal was necessary for Erdoğan mainly for domestic 'consumption' and propaganda purposes, and that the only part of the agreement that could be partially implemented was financial assistance to Turkey.

Turkey's (direct) intervention in the Syria war was relatively belated. Anyway, by the end of March 2017, the Turkish authorities announced the Operation Euphrates Shield a 'mission accomplished'. It was launched in August 2016, and was meant to limit the territorial reach of both the Islamic State in northern Syria and the Kurdish PYD / YPG. The operation had prevented the Kurds from connecting their "cantons" of Kobane and Jazire with the canton of Afrin. The completion of the "Euphrates Shield" - announced just prior to Rex Tillerson's visit to Ankara - did not mean that the Turks were to stop their intervention in Syria. According to Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, new military operations would continue "under a

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different name".⁴ The „Euphrates Shield” achieved some of the goals set by Ankara: the 100 km long border area was cleaned from the ISIL presence, and - on the other front - the Kurds couldn't march further west of the Euphrates. However, the Turks met an obstacle as the Americans deployed their Rangers and Marines near Manbij, preventing a more severe confrontation between the Turks, FSA and the YPG. It's worth noting that the Russians did likewise and - in addition - they established their "reconciliation center" in the canton of Afrin.⁵

These developments do not make the road to Raqqa open for Ankara. The PYD strongly opposes any Turkish involvement in the operation aimed at the re-capture of the de facto capital city of the Islamic State. On the

other hand, Ankara insists that the US must drop its backing for YPG's participation in the liberation of Raqqa.

The question then is whether, without talks being resumed between Ankara and the PKK, it is possible to settle the Kurdish issue in Syria. The question is rhetorical but chances for a dialogue (broken in July 2015) are minimal despite ambiguous enunciations about 'federalism' made by some Turkish politicians on the rallies before the constitutional referendum on April 16.

Scenarios for Syria

The biggest challenge - in Syria as well as in Iraq - is not defeating ISIL in its strongholds in Raqqa or Mosul. The real challenge starts on the very day the Islamic State has been crushed. The bloody, internal conflict and a 'proxy war' have good chances not only to outlast the demise of the self-proclaimed Caliphate but stopping them might prove equally hopeless as it is now - also for the "sponsors" of the fighting parties.

Geopolitically, the situation is extremely complex: Iran has been trying to build its Shia "Crescent" from Iraq through Syria,

⁴ Turkey ends 'Shield' military operation in Syria, PM says

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN17030R>

⁵ Syria Daily: Kurdish Militia — Deal to Allow Russian Base in Northwest
<http://eaworldview.com/2017/03/syria-daily-kurdish-militia-deal-to-allow-russian-base-in-northwest/>

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Lebanon to Yemen. Turkey - at all costs - wants to eliminate an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria. For Russia - its intervention in Syria is a 'boon' in relations with the United States and a critical component of its Middle Eastern ambitions. Therefore, the Russians will stay in the country. Qatar, Saudi Arabia - are concerned with Iran's growing power in their "backyard" as it has significantly increased its support for Houthi rebels occupying Yemen's capital Sanaa since 2015. Iraq needs to balance between Iran and the United States. Interestingly, one of Iraq's top political and religious leaders, the Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, has called Bashar al-Assad to step down "to save his country from further bloodshed".

A sustainable peace deal for Syria can only be achieved through a settlement between main internal and foreign stakeholders. The "negotiations" in the Geneva and Astana formats have demonstrated the insurmountable complexity of the undertaking. The "peace" talks have served more as a propaganda tool and to gaining momentum through possible local ceasefires rather than as a platform for a real peace deal between

the parties. A decisive example is the ceasefire agreement reached in December 2016 and brokered by Russia and Turkey that, not only has not brought a cessation of hostilities, but also helped Assad, Iran and Russia in their fight against the rebels. Neither the pro-government groups nor the Russians did stop fighting and bombing of rebel-held areas.

So far, neither side of the conflict nor their allies - including the United States - have provided a comprehensive and credible postwar scenario for Syria. Such a scenario might be easier to present for Iraq, with its recognized government in Baghdad, and the KRG in the north - than for Syria, with its much bigger local, regional and international problems. But even in Iraq, a sustainable peace and social order are not reachable without a more serious involvement of the Sunni population in the political process.

Unfortunately, the most likely scenario for Syria is the continuation of hostilities with rebel and Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime, on the one hand, and on the other - a kind of confrontation with the Kurds, (possibly) reinforced with the capture of

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Raqqa - the de facto capital of the self-proclaimed Caliphate.⁶

There is no simple or even complex solution at hand for Syria. At this stage, this cannot be lack of weapons and military equipment, or withdrawal of support for the anti-Assad opposition by the Gulf states and Turkey, or by Iran and Russia - for the Assad regime. It is likely that the conflict is going to be finally settled on the battlefields or in accordance with particular local and even tribal interests (at least in the east of Syria). Even this, however, is not entirely clear, as tribal loyalties have been weakened or (at times) even severed over six years of the brutal war.

It is also illusory to believe that those three million Syrian refugees currently residing in Turkey are there to return to their home country after the conflict comes to a close. Even if a large part of them return, there is a serious doubt as to whether they are able to

recover what is left of their property and belongings. Their property has been taken over - probably for good - by families associated with rebel groups or militias occupying a given area. And these are both Syrians as well as families of foreign fighters whose diversity is overwhelming: jihadists from Europe to the Uighurs from the Chinese Xinjiang (about 2000 ethnic Uighur Turks from their "autonomous region" in north-western China⁷). On the other hand, there are also Iran-led Shi'ite groups fighting for Assad, even from Afghanistan.

Do not expect democracy in Syria

The role of local and foreign pro-government and anti-government militias is not going to end with an eventual peace deal. Do not expect democracy in Syria. Just as it is the case in Afghanistan, militants ad

⁶ Syria Daily: Kurdish PYD Leader Bids for Raqqa
<http://eaworldview.com/2017/03/syria-daily-kurdish-pyd-leader-bids-for-raqqa/>

⁷ Concerns grow over rise in Chinese jihadis in Syria
<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2089808/inside-shadowy-world-chinese-militants-fighting-syria>

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their leaders - as well as tribal sheikhs – are expected to play an important role in a post-war Syria.

The vacuum left by the withdrawing Syrian troops and by the breakdown or escape of the administrative, judiciary and security apparatus has long been filled by local councils, composed of influential families, tribal or religious leaders and merchants. In localities and towns controlled by the Kurdish YPG, councils are created by local elites loyal to PYD. PYD, however, has - even in areas with mostly Arab population - monopolized and licensed distribution of some goods and services.⁸

Thus, constitutional changes and the process of political transition in Syria - in order to be moderately successful - must take into account and guarantee interests of all the major stakeholders. Sadly, these interests are not convergent but often mutually exclusive, and quite often they are also projec-

tions of the „sponsor” powers involved in the war. It seems, however, that a certain degree of decentralization of the post-war Syria is inevitable, given the fait accompli of the conflict, new social links and local elites, including networks of "intermediaries", distributing arms, military equipment, humanitarian aid and other goods supplied by foreign donors.

Devolution or Centralisation?

Would a political 'chessboard' like that in Bosnia be a good solution for the "new" Syria? According to the declarations of all the parties - apart from the Kurds - this option is unacceptable. The biggest problem is not a deal between the Arab parties (however extremely serious), but their consent to a 'Kurdish Federation'. Among educated middle-class Syrians there are voices that a kind of federation would be a solution for a post-war Syria, or - a kind of "deal" like that one in Lebanon between different religious and ethnic groups. A formidable obstacle, however, is still Turkey with its 'core' interests in Syria that cause it to reject the Kurdish autonomy in Rojava ("Western Kurdistan"). Its very existence, which is a

⁸ Rana Khalaf, *Governing Rojava, Layers of Legitimacy in Syria; Middle East and North Africa Program*, Chatham House, December 2016, s. 21.

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fact of life, makes headaches to Ankara given the 15 million strong Kurdish minority in Turkey. It's worth noting that the Rojava project is not accepted by a part of Kurdish minority in Turkey, especially by many conservative, religious Kurds, who largely support the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Erdoğan. Turkey is and will remain committed to do whatever it takes to dismantle Rojava. There is no doubt about that.

The actual US strategy towards the Kurds is the big unknown. A tactical support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, where PYD / YPG play a leading role, results from unfavorable US experience with equipping and training programs aimed at local rebel forces. Rebel groups, trained and equipped by American special forces, were taken over by the Nusra Front almost immediately after entering Syria. Most of these rebels had not only handed over their equipment and armoured vehicles to Islamists, but voluntarily switched sides. So the Americans did not have much choice as long as they wanted to effectively fight ISIL and the Nusra Front. That dilemma was highlighted by the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on his recent

visit to Ankara. Also, the US authorities claim that, without American assistance, the Kurds would find an ally in Putin's Russia. Interestingly, a Pan-Kurdish congress was held in mid-February in Moscow.⁹

The defeat of the Islamic State and the capture of Raqqa is going to test US "loyalty" to its Kurdish allies. Given Turkey's - a Nato member - strategic position in the region, and President Trump's business-mindset - the realpolitik has good chances to prevail.¹⁰ On the other hand, the Kurdish cantons might be a useful tool for pressure on Erdoğan's Turkey.

Worth noting: Trump congratulated (as Putin did too) Erdogan on his victory in the April 16 constitutional referendum. But the

⁹ Russia Hosts Pan-Kurdistan Conference – The Third Great Middle East War
<https://nsnbc.me/2017/02/15/russia-hosts-pan-kurdistan-conference-the-third-great-middle-east-war/>

¹⁰ US-led coalition has no intention to create federal Kurdish state in Syria: official
<http://aranews.net/2017/03/us-led-coalition-has-no-intention-to-create-federal-kurdish-state-in-syria-official>

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USA-Turkey relationship has been strained by Washington's support for the YPG/PYD, and its firm, 'rule of law' position as to Turkey's requests for the extradition of the reclusive cleric Fethullah Gülen - the alleged mastermind of the failed coup of July 15, 2016. The Turkish opposition to Rojava's autonomy is set to be even more resolute now, given the plans of the Barzanis regarding the referendum on Iraqi Kurdistan's independence. Main Kurdish parties in Iraq: the Kurdistan Democratic Party of the Barzanis and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan have reached an agreement on the referendum. The relationship between Ankara and Erbil has been also hampered by the fact that the Peshmerga had hung the Kurdish flags in Kirkuk - formally not part of the Kurdish Region. The Turks fear the domino effect and worsening of the already tense situation in the south-eastern part of the country. Adding insult to injury, the PYD leaders see also Raqqa within their "Federation".¹¹ The situation remains un-

clear and is set to be resolved only after defeating the Islamic State.

Jihadism and its future in Syria and beyond

Last but not least, there is a question of what is going to happen to those jihadist groups that survive the defeat of the Islamic State, with its strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa. Most likely, they will go underground as this was the Islamist tactic when US forces crushed them (after the US invasion of Iraq). What we can expect is more suicide, terrorist attacks, and jihadist will disperse, seeking safe havens in other countries, including Europe, Russia and Central Asia.

Therefore, that peculiar form of Islamic extremism is to stay with us as there are no reasons for it to disappear, and the "demand" is still significant. Islamic fundamentalism is the fruit of social-political frustration and grievances, and these will not end

¹¹ Syria Daily: Kurdish PYD Leader Bids for Raqqa

<http://eaworldview.com/2017/03/syria-daily-kurdish-pyd-leader-bids-for-raqqa/>

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in the foreseeable future. But first and foremost, Islamist extremism is - in the eyes of many Syrian militants - a kind of war identity in the fight against al-Assad's secularized, 'Alawite' regime. The situation is similar to that in Iraq, where, after the fall of Saddam Hussein and Iran's penetration of the region, the government has been dominated by the Shi'ite majority that had been persecuted before. The Sunnis have been alienated (USA should take blame, at least partly), and Islamist groups have become the only viable platform for fighting for the Sunni cause, against both the US and Iran's "expansion." The collapse of the "Caliphate", or defeating such extremist groups like the Hay'at Tahrir ash-Sham coalition, does not mean the elimination of jihadism in Syria or Iraq. It is not possible to physically get rid of extremism or kill all the extremists.

Conclusion

Indeed, it is hard to see an antidote to radical Islamist ideology in the reconstruction of Syria and Iraq with the support of the international community, including the European Union. And according to World Bank estimates, rebuilding of Syria to a

GDP comparable to the pre-war one, would require \$ 180 billion in investment.¹²

An alternative solution to the Syrian inferno - however, not very convincing one - would be a political deal involving some of the groups now considered as extremist ones. But it is still too early, as evidenced by the failure of negotiations with "moderate" rebels in different formats at various levels. Sadly, it seems that without even more bloodshed peace is not achievable.

Hopefully, "sponsors" of the conflicting parties: Russia and Iran, and on the other hand - Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, must eventually come to the conclusion that greater strategic gains are not possible without far-reaching and possibly unprofitable costs. Only then the time will be ripe

¹² Devarajan, Shantayanan; Mottaghi, Lili; Do, Quy-Toan; Abdel Jelil, Mohamed. 2016. Syria: reconstruction for peace. Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Economic Monitor. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/777291467993169903/Syria-reconstruction-for-peace>

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for "real" and serious negotiations. However, we may not be fully aware of the value of blood and hope invested by the parties to the Syrian conflict. Apart from the strategic interests of neighboring countries, there are also psychological obstacles, purely human. And these may prove hardest to overcome.

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Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

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