

Scenarios for Syria

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Seven years of civil war have left Syria devastated, resulting in over half-a-million casualties and precipitating the largest humanitarian crisis in modern history. Apart from the grave human suffering, geopolitically, the conflict constitutes an intricate and often opaque theater in which foreign actors continue to pursue their strategic objectives whilst further obfuscating an already ambiguous situation. This article aspires to shed light on the current situation and present relevant scenarios.

While foreign powers have leveraged their alliances vis-à-vis the future of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime and stabilization of Syria, Syrians remain divided over the question whether President al-Assad ought to remain in power or should be deposed in any future Syrian power arrangement. Syria's future is predominantly determined by the four major powers with roles in the conflict: Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States (US). Ironically, it is increasingly evident that the Syrian population has almost no influence in resolving the conflict.

History and dynamics of the Syrian conflict

President Bashar al-Assad's family has been in power since 1970, when President Hafiz al-Assad, Bashar's father, led a successful military coup. He then dominated Syria's affairs until his passing in June 2000.¹ Years of political repression, in which Assad's powerful intelligence services detained and tortured many Syrians, were the main reason for the Syrian uprising in 2011. That year, the arrest and torture of 15 children responsible for painting anti-government graffiti on their school walls sparked nationwide peaceful protests. Most protesters were part of the Sunni majority and faced brutal force exerted by the

security forces of the Alawite-dominated regime, accentuating lingering sectarian divisions in Syrian society.

Economic inequality, soaring living costs, and the monopolization of the economy by a handful of Alawite families constituted deep-seated motivations for the initial uprising. The omnipotent intelligence apparatus quelled any residual dissent within the regime's armed forces. There have been various reports by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) of chemical weapons being used by the Assad regime: mustard gas, chlorine and even Sarin.²

The absence of systematic military coordination between the opposition-affiliated rebel groups and the perpetual incoherence among the approximately 40 Syrian political opposition movements illustrates the ineffectiveness of the revolution. The agglomeration of these groups is substantially reliant on and subjected to the geopolitical interests of Turkey, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar and various other Gulf countries. Similarly, the Syrian army relies heavily on Russia and Iran, having only 25,000 troops in comparison with its pre-war strength of 220,000 due to defections and casualties.



In late 2013, the power vacuum made Syria an attractive target for extremist groups to infiltrate the country. The Islamic State (IS) conducted several attacks on both regime and opposition forces in Syria and Western civilians in and outside the country. By 2014, IS controlled almost half of Syria. Since then, the self-declared caliphate has shrunk considerably. In 2015, Syrian Kurds began threatening IS territory, and with the support of the US and Western allies, IS lost 98% of its former Syrian territories. The Russian air force and Iran's elite Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were also instrumental in the caliphate's military decline. The old adage of "the devil you know" seems to strike a chord with most Syrians, who perceive IS to be an even more horrific alternative than Assad.

Recent Developments

Recently, the Syrian conflict has shifted decidedly in favor of Assad. Since taking control of Aleppo in late 2016, the Assad regime — aided by Iran, Russia, and the Lebanese militant organization Hezbollah — has re-captured important parts of Syria from IS and opposition groups and now controls approximately 60% of Syria. These areas include Raqqa (the IS self-declared capital, which fell to the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces [SDF] in October 2017), the Eastern Ghouta district (rebel-held), and the Southern Daraa

region (the cradle of the Syrian uprising in 2011).

De-escalation zones agreed upon by Iran, Russia, and Turkey, aimed at reducing violence and ending the conflict, allowed Assad to seize additional territory. These zones were designed to weaken the opposition, allowing the regime to choose where and which battles to fight. Three main fighting-group factions remain active in the country: the Kurdish-led SDF; other opposition groups such as Jabhat Tahrir Suriya (an alliance between Ahrar al Sham and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki movement) and Hay'at Tahrir Al Sham (a jihadist group with ties to Al-Qaeda); and IS.

The SDF controls more than a quarter of Syrian territory in Kurdish-majority areas along the northern and eastern borders. This includes some Arab non-Kurdish areas and parts of the oil-rich eastern province of Deir el-Zour. It also has access to important water resources and farmland. The US has backed the Kurds and deployed forces in SDF-controlled areas during its campaign against IS. However, the Kurds have grown wary about the future of their alliance with the US given the near-defeat of IS. Thus, the Kurds would be inclined to negotiate a political deal with Assad that would safeguard their autonomy. Washington has not made concrete promises to the Kurds and is unlikely to support Kurdish aspirations for self-rule because it would jeopardize

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the US's relationship with Turkey. The Kurds are not likely to receive support from Russia as Moscow disapproved of their recent independence referendum in Iraq. This leaves Assad with one option when it comes to the Kurds: negotiating rather than attacking Kurdish-controlled areas because they are protected by US troops.

The jihadist Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham group controls the northern province of Idlib. They receive Turkish support and have various observation posts manned by the Turkish army. In agreement with Russia and Iran, Idlib is one of the four de-escalation zones where Turkey is assigned to monitor the truce between the Syrian regime and the opposition. Ankara fears another refugee crisis if the Assad regime assaults Idlib again. Emboldened by recent victories in Daraa and surrounding areas, Assad is likely to target Idlib because it is the last sanctuary of the defecting rebels.

The current presence of IS is very limited in Syria. IS still maintains a small presence in the Syrian desert, Idlib province, and remote areas along the Syria-Iraq borders. IS has returned to its roots as a terrorist organization, carrying out insurgent attacks and bombings. IS is estimated to have several hundred combatants left.

Key foreign actors

The Syrian conflict has long been described as a geopolitical struggle and proxy war between competing international powers. Below is an overview of the conflict's main foreign actors and antagonists.

Russia: Moscow perceived the unparalleled challenge to Assad as a direct threat to the future of its geopolitical interests in the country and region, including the most important one: the naval base in the port city of Tartus, which provides Russian forces access to the Mediterranean. Enforced by Russia's substantial maritime and air forces, Moscow holds tremendous sway over Assad whose military gains and very survival depend prodigiously on Russia.

Pipeline politics are also important as Russia aims to build a gas pipeline capitalizing on Syria's potential as a transit hub for regional oil and gas supplies to European markets, solidifying Russia's geopolitical energy leverage over Europe.

Furthermore, Syrian reconstruction would be lucrative for Russian construction companies. Russia is also cooperating more with Turkey — Russia helped Turkey earlier this year with its offensive against the SDF, and Russia recently refused to support an independent Kurdistan in Iraq.

Preventing Iran from becoming the region's preeminent hegemon constitutes Moscow's less obvious strategic interest as Russia and Iran historically have had geographically competing spheres of influence. Tehran and Moscow are both vehemently opposed to US hegemony and have aligned over Assad's political future. However, tensions persist over the reconstruction of the Syrian infrastructure, economy and the extraction and transport of oil and gas as Moscow perceives future Iranian gas exports to Europe as a strategic threat.

Iran: Tehran has been a key ally of the Syrian regime and has played a critical role in the war since 2012. Tehran has strong ties with the Assad regime and considers Syria an important ally and an invaluable land corridor to Hezbollah. Syria was the only Arab government to explicitly support Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Iran aims to solidify its presence in Syria to strengthen its coveted land bridge to Lebanon. By preventing the collapse of the Assad regime, Tehran seeks to prevent the ascendance in Syria of Sunni extremist and radically anti-Shia groups. In keeping with Tehran's preference for the utilizations of proxies, in 2012 the IRGC assisted in the creation of the National Defense Forces (NDF), a paramilitary organization assisting the Syrian army with approximately 100,000 fighters.

Iran aspires to establish a permanent (para)military presence in Syria to protect its regional interests, retain its retaliatory deterrence capabilities (notably directed against Israel) and safeguard its logistical lines to Hezbollah. As

*A frozen conflict
is the most likely
scenario*

previously mentioned, the current Russo-Persian alliance is inherently fragile and beset with centuries of Iranian suspicion about Russian motives. Russia's leverage over Assad poses a threat to Iran's projection of power and influence in

Syria and the wider region. Furthermore, Tehran and Moscow have conflicting interests when it comes to unlocking Iran's vast gas export potential and the reconstruction of Syria, and Tehran remains wary of Moscow's close ties to Israel and Iran's regional antagonist the KSA.

Turkey: Turkey has been vocal in supporting the opposition in Syria, as Ankara would have much to gain from ousting Assad. Turkey has trained and funded different parts of the



Syrian opposition and rebel groups. Turkey's primary focus is the Kurdish issue and preventing the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state. That is why in early 2018 the Turkish army went into the Afrin province. Ankara is concerned about US support for the Syrian Kurds and is increasingly cooperating with Russia. Gas supply routes are another reason behind Ankara's opposition to Assad's regime, as the Assad government rejected a Qatar-Turkey pipeline. Historically, Turkey perceives Syria well within Ankara's desired sphere of influence along the lines of the Ottoman Empire in which Turkey seeks to reaffirm its former clout.

US: Starting in 2014, the Obama administration allowed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to covertly train thousands of insurgents from various rebel groups. However, the program was not considered successful because the trained forces lacked capabilities and could not be relied upon in the fight against IS. Furthermore, the lack of a cohesive moderate Syrian opposition and the strong influence of Islamist militias made Washington reluctant to support the opposition. In 2017, Trump halted the CIA program in order to improve relations with Russia and to give priority to eliminating IS. On the other hand, the SDF showed that they were capable and reliable, and gave the US confidence that they could take back territory from IS. The US alliance with the Kurds became stronger, and the Kurds now control roughly one-quarter of Syria thanks to US support. The US led an international coalition — many NATO-members were included — to combat IS but maintains only a limited pres-

ence of approximately 2,000 troops on the ground, focused on removing the last remnants of IS.

Israel: Israel's primary interest in Syria is to prevent and frustrate Tehran's efforts to establish and augment its coveted land corridor to Lebanon and Hezbollah. Israel is not interested in the further escalation of fighting in Syria, but it will not accept Iranian militia near the Golan Heights and rejects any type of permanent Iranian presence in Syria. Netanyahu identified four red lines for Israel: the establishment of an Iranian military presence in Syria, Iranian operations against Israel from Syria, the transfer of advanced weapons to Lebanon via Syria, and the production of such weapons in Syria. Moscow's commitment to monitor Iranian-controlled areas as part of the ceasefire arrangements does not fully resolve Israel's concerns. Israel will not shy away from carrying out further attacks in southern Syria to confront and discourage Iranian (para)military forces and the IRGC and create a buffer zone.

Qatar: Qatar has supported and funded the Syrian revolution since its early days, spending approximately 3 billion USD in the first two years of the war. Qatar's rivalry with Saudi Arabia has been clear through the media coverage and propaganda against Assad. However, its role has diminished in the past few years along with its funding for the rebels. The Qatar diplomatic crisis in which Qatar is boycotted by a Saudi-led coalition of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations over Doha's alleged support for terrorism and Qatar's

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close ties with Tehran, has also resulted in Doha's diminished appetite to further antagonize the KSA and its allies. Qatar has recently been more supportive of a political solution and a peace agreement.

Saudi Arabia: Like Qatar, Riyadh has been involved in the Syrian revolution since its early days, supplying weapons to various rebel groups especially in the first years of the war. Syria's future poses a key proxy warfare theater for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry for supremacy in which Riyadh and Tehran are locked in a geopolitical struggle for dominance over the Middle East and Muslim world. Riyadh seeks to oppose and disrupt Tehran's efforts to realize its strategic interests in Syria. Relations between Riyadh and Damascus have been deteriorating for years, plummeting to abysmal levels after the 2005 assassination of Lebanon's prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, a Sunni politician close to Riyadh, for which the KSA held Assad responsible. Ever since, Riyadh has predominantly followed Washington's lead on foreign policy towards Damascus and has tried to punish the Assad regime for its alliance with Iran.

UK and France: The United Kingdom (UK) has played a key role as a partner in the anti-IS coalition, as the second-largest contributor to air operations against IS, with 1,700 airstrikes in Syria and Iraq since 2014. France shares the UK's views, and sees fighting IS as key to its national security. However, France's specific involvement in Syria has been limited.

Jordan: Jordan's involvement in the war in Syria has been limited. Amman's policy is overly cautious and focused on avoiding a spillover of the conflict into its territory. Jordan has been able to maintain security along its 375km border with Syria. In 2014 and in 2016, Jordan participated in airstrikes against IS. The main concern for Jordan is the presence of Hezbollah and any other Iranian militias in the South which could irritate the US and Israel and further destabilize the area.

China: Although China is not directly involved in the war in Syria, it has vetoed six UN resolutions against the Syrian government. Its support for Syria is a strategic decision to protect its interest in the Middle East and prevent another Western military intervention in the region that would create a pro-Western government. The Chinese have been supportive of diplomacy and a political solution with no outside interference, but they have been providing training and humanitarian aid to Assad's government since 2016. China is expected to play a big role in the reconstruction of post-war Syria.

Scenarios and alternative futures for Syria

There have been several international diplomatic talks among the key foreign actors involved in the Syrian conflict. Russia, Iran, and Turkey all exert a huge influence over the fate of Assad and future Syrian power arrangements. Three main scenarios can be discerned and illuminate the possible outcomes of the Syrian conflict.

Scenario 1: Frozen Conflict. To stay in power, Assad informally accepts giving the Kurds 25% of Syrian territory and does not seek further confrontation. The violence then de-escalates, and 2018 is likely the final year of the brutal conflict. This outcome will result in the return of Syrian refugees, especially those near the borders in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. All opposition and defector fighting groups are weakened, and they are thus unable to reclaim the territory they have lost. Some opposition groups will potentially remain in control of parts of Syria supported by the Turks and Gulf countries. Those rebel groups that are currently focused on maintaining territory will become more like guerilla insurgents, conducting terrorist-type attacks in different parts of the country. This scenario can become reality only if the Turks accept the informal autonomy of the Kurds over approximately a quarter of the Syrian country.

Scenario 2: Settlement. A political agreement is reached, including a meaningful transition of power and a weakening of Assad over the next few years. A transitional governing body with full executive powers will draft a new constitution, eventually leading to elections supervised by the United Nations (UN). A coalition government will be formed and have representation from all the different groups (Sunnis, Kurds, Alawites, Christians etc.). This type of political transition would encourage millions of refugees to return and would allow the creation of a Syria for all the twenty-three million Syrians and not just Assad supporters. There has been much discussion about this potential federalization of Syria and establishment of a coalition government like that of Lebanon. However, Assad still vows to achieve a full military victory over the rebels and the recapture of every inch of lost territory. He perceives the Kurds as "temporary structures," while the Kurds hope to achieve permanent autonomy in a decentralized Syrian state. Foreign forces determined to stay in Syria, such as the Iranians, further complicate the situation. It also remains unclear if Moscow and Ankara plan to withdraw their forces in the near future.

Scenario 3: Escalation. Given US and Russian cooperation on the war in Syria and without additional funding to the rebels from Turkey or the Gulf countries, it is highly unlikely



that the situation will deteriorate. The biggest risk will be if the tensions between Iranian militias, IRGC and Hezbollah and the Israeli defense forces escalate. Because the goal for Israel is to force a complete Iranian withdrawal, Israel is likely to widen the scope of its involvement across the border. Iran could either withdraw or face asset destruction in Syria. Although unlikely, Iran could choose to push Hezbollah into conflict with Israel. Hezbollah has not fought with Israel for the past ten years. If this happens, it could turn both Syria and Lebanon into a war zone. Other unexpected developments could also turn the country in a new phase of violence: the departure or death of Assad, a direct confrontation between Assad's army and the Turks in the Idlib province and/or further escalation of the tensions between the US and Iran.

The Assad government has already put in place a plan for the reconstruction of Syria supported by Russia. However, many Western and Arab countries will not participate or fund the reconstruction unless a meaningful political agreement is reached. Reconstruction is estimated to cost about \$250 billion, according to the World Bank.

Conclusion

The war in Syria has now lasted more than seven years, a civil war that morphed into a conflict of global dimensions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Syria now has 6 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's), another 6 million Syrians are registered as refugees with thirteen million people in need of

humanitarian assistance. Sixty-six percent of Syrian children suffer from war-related traumas. The Syrian economy is crippled; the country is devastated.

There are at least three scenarios for Syria: Frozen Conflict, Settlement and Escalation. A political agreement, settlement, could be reached that includes a meaningful transition of power to a coalition government and a federal, decentralized Syria that represents all groups. This diplomatic solution requires international political will. Russia, Iran and Turkey will be reluctant to give up their current favorable situation. A frozen conflict is the most likely scenario.

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