

OPTIONS FOR SYRIA

The Syrian civil war is one of the longest ongoing conflicts since the Cold War, taking a heavy toll on civilians, as well as leaving long-lasting effects on regional and international politics. In the midst of the uncertainty facing the region, the Syrian civil war haunts regional state actors as well as non-state entities. Similarly, capitals miles and oceans away are in no way shielded from problems spilling over from Syrian borders. The Syrian crisis has gone beyond a regional concern and become a global problem that is even beginning to define the domestic politics of global powers. With high stakes for all involved, the situation in Syria has gone through years of decay. As the crisis has changed form, these primary actors' policies and priorities have evolved as well. The chemical attack by the regime in Khan Shaykoon on April 4 and the ensuing US response on April 7 have introduced new variables into the equation in Syria. With the change in American administration and the new American initiatives in Syria (e.g. the tomahawk attack on the Al Shayat airbase), the parallel Astana and Geneva processes, and with more actors getting involved or being submerged in Syria, it is time to reassess the situation in the country and seek options for its future.

The Political Track:

In this session, the participants discussed the prospects of talks on Syria in Astana and Geneva, and assessed the priorities of the major Syrian actors and the options available to them.

From ceasefires to negotiations and factionalism, the Syrian opposition faces multiple challenges from both outside and inside. Yet, the biggest concern of the opposition is the situation of Assad. They realize that the international community takes Assad and his regime's presence as an unfortunate reality that needs to be dealt with both practically and flexibly. The Khan Shakoon chemical attack and the American response in bombing the Shayrat airbase changed the rhetoric a little, increasing the stakes for engagement with Damascus as a political practicality. But nonetheless, the opposition position, which says that "Assad must go in any political transition situation", is not the response that the international community wants to hear from Syrians in opposition. Some participants highlighted the fact that only the regime was able to keep a united front from Geneva to Astana, as the opposition groups who attended each negotiation were different groups. Lacking continuity and unity, the opposition was not able to get much out of the negotiations. From the opposition groups' perspective, while the regime was always hostile to any kind of resolution in the negotiations, it nonetheless emerged as the main beneficiary of the processes.

The other handicap that some participants pointed out was there were no real ceasefires for the opposition forces during the time they sat at the negotiation table. Without a true ceasefire, negotiations cannot kick start, but it is also very hard to make people agree to the terms of the ceasefire. DeMistura's local ceasefires project was a modest attempt to get around this problem. However, some discussants claimed that the major problem with ceasefires is the fact that they are not successful because they have nothing to do with political transition. It is widely believed amongst the opposition that unless the regime's air force is crippled, a real ceasefire

is not possible. Additionally, it was raised that despite the agreed ceasefires, in the past the regime had used this time as a tactic to change the military balance on the ground via starvation, demographic changes etc., which in the end sabotaged the ceasefire. The participants highlighted that these aggressive acts by the regime need to be taken into account if Astana is to be successful.

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From the perspective of the groups that attended the negotiations, the talk of moderation and de-escalation are useless without any sense of justice being built into the system. One of the major apprehensions the opposition groups voiced in the discussions was the issue of human rights, which kept getting diluted both in Geneva to Astana, and is now reduced almost entirely to prisoner exchange. The lack of accountability, justice and human rights in the objectives of the negotiations cripples the capacity for these talks to succeed.

The issue of factionalism within the opposition dominates the talks. However, some participants have claimed that this as a natural phenomenon given that all opposition forces are also rivals for the same resources and support mechanisms. Looking at examples from other civil wars, they see factionalism as almost an indispensable part of the crisis. It is a known fact that big groups, such as Ahrar As-Sham, are swallowing up smaller groups; therefore, the nuances, different requests and preferences that these small groups represent are gradually melting within the agenda of the big factions. Some discussants put forth the claim of the opposition that is with decentralization and localization, the major effects of factionalism can be overcome. Clashes in East Ghouta,

where some opposition forces sought to oust elements they deemed to be radicals, were cited in relation to widely-cited concerns about radicalization. When other options were made available, these groups appear to distance themselves from radicalization. Therefore, the case was made that suffocating those groups that offer change and opposition leads towards radicalization.

The case was also made that within the opposition there is sarcasm aimed at questions like “what do Syrians want?” They feel they cannot respond to such questions in the current volatile situation caused by the conflicting interests of Russia and the U.S. Russia, through its intervention, helped Assad gain control of areas which otherwise would have been impossible for him to take over or rule. On the other hand, the U.S. created the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and made them an actor, which altered the northern border from Iraq to Idlib. This environment in Syria is not conducive for opposition groups to voice their preferences. In this situation, they are forced to choose from limited options, and their preferences are pushed aside as impractical because international powers keep playing with the ‘realities’ on the ground to get what they want out of the situation.

Some participants proposed the idea that Iran thinks that Astana is about intra-Syria dialogue and that opposition groups should come to table with no conditions attached. Also, they said that other actors on the table, like Turkey, needed to be more practical and open to the PYD’s involvement in the negotiations. The positions of the PYD and YPG were the most contested issues in the discussions. Some strongly suggested that the unilateral declaration of federalism by the PYD is unacceptable in the eyes of the opposition forces, and unilateral efforts as such cannot be successful. They also raised serious concerns regarding local governance



techniques in the north (cantons etc.) as these techniques are widely seen as contradicting the way the rest of Syria is run. Along with the local governance, other major concerns included the issue of how indigenous Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) really were in Syria given that the YPG, the major fighting force within the SDF, has organic ties with PKK. It was claimed that supporting the YPG fuels the civil war because of the problems of representation they face. However, some participants used the example of Lebanon to show that for negotiations to be successful, as few major actors as possible should be excluded. Otherwise they turn into spoilers. In Syria, Nusra and ISIS have to be excluded, but excluding the PYD as well makes too many spoilers. On the other hand, this position was contested, given that the PYD is not considered a Syrian entity, and it maintains ties to the internationally recognized PKK terrorist organization.

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The PKK was born in Turkey and is a project directed at Turkey. However, as they have developed regional branches, the dilemma has become more apparent. Are they prioritizing regional ambitions or focusing on Turkey? Do they use regional forces to fight against Turkey, or are they aiming to establish Ocalan-inspired regional sovereign entities who oppose Turkey? Some

participants claimed that the YPG fighters recruited during the Syrian conflict have the potential to become something other than the PKK. They are more like anti-ISIS fighters than anti-Turkish forces. They are different than people who spent their youth fighting against Turkey, and they include Arab and Turkmen commanders that have nothing to do with fight against Turkey.

Other participants contested this position by saying that when we talk of the PYD in Syria, we talk of the potential for making the YPG something other than PKK. However, Ocalan pictures almost completely cover the walls of even the tiniest PYD offices, so the realities on the ground do not support the idea that this is a possibility.

Among the Syrian Kurds in the north, there is another the point of contention, which is to what type of federalization they aspire. The PYD is asking for geographical federalization, but the Kurdish National Council (KNC) is advocating for ethnic federalization. Two options for northern Syria were discussed: keeping it a Syrian Kurdish movement, or starting an intra-Kurdish dialogue with Iraqi Kurds. If they keep it a Syrian Kurdish movement, they will be dependent on the regime and Russia. However, if they start an intra-Kurdish dialogue and reach an agreement with the KRG, then they have the chance of sustainability. However, the KRG is not a fan of geographic federalization, and it seems like an intra-Kurdish agreement forming a cooperation corridor joining Northern Iraq and Syria would inspire objections from all major regional actors, e.g. from Turkey, Iran and even Iraq.

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The problem of indigeneity also surrounds the Shia militias. While there is much talk about militia forces within the opposition, from the opposition perspective, Iran-backed alien groups like Hizbullah or Afghan militia groups are the major sources of conflict on the ground.

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A little refresher going over the memories of the last five years showed that the Assad regime was and still is the key point on which this crisis hangs. For millions of people who support and mobilize behind different opposition groups, ousting Assad remains the major goal. Given this situation, any real political solution for the opposition cannot have Assad involved, yet the prospects for ousting the Assad regime have significantly diminished in recent years. In the meantime, the options for opposition groups seem to have centered around local administrative councils, which have been effective governance units in opposition-held areas. There is an urgency to support and reinforce local councils. The case was made that this experience also proves that elections first need to be held at local levels rather than at state level. People trust and work within local units, while state-level entities do not have statewide legitimacy. Also, assassinations are parts of the dreadful reality that a lot of former opposition leaders have been subjected to throughout this prolonged war. This reality will haunt any proposed state-level elections, with or without Assad, given the fact that opposition leaders cannot go to Damascus to take their places in parliament without risking their lives being taken given that institutions of the regime (e.g. intelligence, the army, etc.) will still be in

place. Therefore, at this point, local elections and territorial power-sharing seem to be the only viable option for Syrian opposition groups. More importantly, constitutional reform, with the goal of political transition in sight, is indispensable before any election takes place.

The Role of International Actors:

In this session, participants focused on the options available for international actors in the Syrian context. They tackled questions such as “Is US foreign policy shifting?” “What is the Iranian future acceptable role in Syria from Russia’s perspective?” “What is the future of Russian-Turkish relations?” etc.

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Russia had three priorities in intervening in the Syrian conflict, which to this day remain the leading concerns for Russia: 1) Utilizing its position in Syria as leverage against the West (especially in the conflict with Ukraine), 2) Reinserting itself as an important regional power in the MENA region, filling the vacuum the Obama administration created in the region and asserting its status as a global power 3) Fighting radicalism. Russia saw the regime changes in the post-Arab uprisings MENA as western efforts to limit Russian presence in the region and enclose Russia from the south.

It was suggested by some discussants that Russian reflexes in the region resembled the USSR mentality of supporting socialist and nationalist autocrats. Often the Syrian case is compared to the USSR- Afghanistan situation, with Syria being another swamp that is going to swallow Moscow. Yet this view



was challenged by others, who suggested that Russia is not naive about the realities of the Syrian civil war and is aware that a military solution will not be enough, Syria will never be the same, and Assad will not be around forever. However, the Russian aim is to leave behind a “secular” country where a Russian military and economic presence is guaranteed, and where the conflict may continue but does not spill over Syria’s borders in too dramatic a fashion.

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Russia seems rather limited in terms of partners in Syria. It is suggested that Russian ties with Assad and Iran should not be categorized as strong alliances but marriages of convenience. A widely cited account of 2001, when Assad refused to return Chechan fighters, was again presented as one of the proofs that Moscow is not a fan of Assad. However, Moscow does not seem to have unlimited control over Damascus, and works together with Iran, which has a totally different vision for the ME than that of Russia. Moreover, Russians are not necessarily fully welcoming to Iranian ambitions in the Mediterranean or against Israel. When Israel bombed the Syrian army, Russia summoned the Israeli ambassador to the Kremlin, but when Israel bombed Hizbullah, Russia chose silence on the matter as they see Israel as a sovereign state with the right to protect itself against threats from Hizbullah. This was presented as evidence by some participants that Russia has made it clear that Hizbullah is not its ally and Israel-Hizbullah contentions do not concern Russia. It seems like while access to Hizbullah is key for Iran, Russia does not favor a strong Hizbullah. This is a crucial

point of contention that signals the limits of the alliance between Iran and Russia.

Even though Russia may not be a “fan” of Assad, it has heavily bombed the opposition and helped Assad advance and brutally take over places like Aleppo that he would otherwise not have been able to. Therefore, the opposition does not trust Russia and would not want to work with Russia, let alone welcome a Russian presence in Syria: this means that Russia is stuck with Assad in both the short and long run. In order to ensure its military and economic presence in Syria, Russia has to work with Assad. The level of support Assad enjoys from Russia is disproportionately high when compared to Russian influence in Damascus. By backing Assad almost at all costs, the Russians have got themselves stuck with his regime. Therefore, some discussants claimed that in some ways, Russian favoritism towards the PYD can be read as an effort to gain a local ally other than Assad and one that is like-minded. It is known that in Afrin, Russian troops are patrolling the border with Turkey to protect the PYD, and they seem to try to stall Turkish attacks against the PYD: at times, even more than the U.S. does.

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It was said that the American tomahawk attacks on Shayrat airbase should have been a reality check for Russia, but it is not clear whether they had that effect. The Russian response has been balanced, yet it seems like Moscow interpreted the attack more as American efforts to deal with domestic issues rather than a sign of American ambitions in



Syria. However, there is an important reality: the U.S. was able to accurately conduct missile attacks from over 1,000 km away in the Mediterranean. It is not clear whether Russia chose to let this happen or whether it could not have stopped the tomahawks. Regardless of whether the American attack on the Shayrat airbase is a game changer in Syria, it is bound to shake up Russian military ambitions in the region.

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Currently, the Russian solution for Syria is the de-escalation zones. These de-escalation zones were accepted in Astana and Russia presented them to the UN. Russia is skeptical of safe zones, while the U.S. is talking of safe zones now, as Russia does not believe providing security for safe zones is a possibility.

U.S. policy in Syria seem to be the most varied. There was an assumption that Trump would be more accommodating to Syria, since Russia was seen as being in the driver's seat. However, American tomahawk attacks presented a different administration. It was not the first time since the 2013 chemical attack deal that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons on Syrians. There were no conclusive remarks amongst the participants as to why this time the U.S. decided to take action against Assad for reneging on the agreement. It was noted that Obama's 2013 chemical deal was always controversial amongst Republican circles, and they always wanted to see more action. It was also said that according to Washington, the Syrian regime oscillates between Russia and Iran to get approval for its attacks, and getting approval from either one (usually regardless whether the other one rejects it) gives Damascus the green light to carry out an attack. This

meant that Assad must have gotten approval from either Russia or Iran. If Russia's lack of involvement is believed to be genuine in Washington, it means Iran was behind the attack, which further pushed the new administration—which already finds Iranian regional politics highly distasteful—to act to curb further actions. This administration does not view Iranian activities as defensive, while the previous administration did.

Beyond the reasons for this attack, the nature of the attack was a point of discussion as well. It was still a very measured and calculated response by the U.S. Russia was warned shortly before the attack to avoid collusion, and given that the bombed airbase was the one from which chemical attacks were carried out, it was a clear response to Assad by the U.S., demolishing about 20 percent of his air force according to Secretary of Defense James Mattis. As mentioned earlier, the tomahawks signaled American military superiority. However, another reason for the high-tech attack from more than 1,000 km away is there is not much support for large ground forces in Syria. It is believed that the US has about 2,000 troops on the ground right now . However, unless circumstances change, there is not much support for a large intervention, and hence high-tech attacks from the Mediterranean that do not need large ground forces.

It was thought that the U.S. was aware of the ethnic and ideological problems associated with the YPG and Syrian Democratic Forces. However, the U.S. is overinvested in the YPG and sees them as the only viable ground forces to lead their overt actions in the fight against ISIS

A lack of willingness to deploy American ground forces means that the U.S. needs local ground forces that can deliver. At this point, one policy that has not changed with the incoming administration is their support for



the YPG. It was suggested by the participants that by choosing to support the YPG, the U.S. ended up with a group that controls much of the oilfields, agricultural lands, water and energy resources of the country. Thus, the U.S. also became a beneficiary of their alignment with the Kurds. It was thought that the U.S. was aware of the ethnic and ideological problems associated with the YPG and Syrian Democratic Forces. However, the U.S. is overinvested in the YPG and sees them as the only viable ground forces to lead their overt actions in the fight against ISIS. Almost all the participants claimed that Raqqa will be taken soon, and that the main battle will be in Deir al-Zour. For the post-Raqqa period, the contours of U.S. policy are still not clear. The regime also realizes that the U.S. will run into problems supporting the YPG as it pushes to become relevant in eastern Syria. It is suggested that we need to talk more about the policy for the Euphrates valley in the post-Raqqa period.

Europeans will have a larger role once the political transition processes become reality in the post-armed conflict era.

There European nations like France who invested in local administration councils and reconstruction projects will become influential actors

Other major international actors that have a very minor role in Syria are European countries. Europe's role is very limited. Many countries have elections now, and Syria, refugees and Daesh are issues of domestic politics in Europe. Especially with growing populism, these issues have been at the forefront of daily politics. Europe wants stability but does not know how to achieve it. In these discussions, it was said that Europe's solution is to "throw" money at the problem (humanitarian aid etc.). However, although EU countries spend a lot in Syria, they do not have much sway. The initial weakness

of Europeans in meaningfully responding to the Syrian crisis still haunts them. The Khan Shaykoon chemical attack significantly raised the burden of trying to find a solution including the regime. The refugee deal with Turkey is controversial as Europe says that people have the right to asylum then tries to outsource it to other nations. Europe is in desperate need of stability and peace in Syria but has not got the tools to ensure such an outcome. Local councils and reconstruction projects have been where European actors, such as France, have become actively involved. The participants stated that Europeans are heavily invested in post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization for variety of reasons, one of them being ensuring the return of Syrian refugees to Syria. Given their current investments, it was suggested that Europeans will have a larger role once the political transition processes become reality in the post-armed conflict era. There European nations like France who invested in local administration councils and reconstruction projects will become influential actors.

The Role of Regional Actors:

In this session participants discussed the changes in the roles of regional actors on Syria. They responded to many questions, some of which included: "How have their policies changed?" "Can there be a Saudi-Iranian agreement on Syria?" and "What is a future acceptable role for the PYD from Turkey's perspective?"

Iranian government rhetoric describes Daesh's transgressions into Iraq and connecting Iraq to Syria as the major events that turned Syria into a national security issue for Iran. It is contested whether Iran was already present in Syria prior to this fact, but from the Iranian national security rhetoric the threat is real and imminent. Iran says that it wants to prioritize the territorial integrity in Syria and for Syria to remain in



the “axis of resistance”. Participants discussed that regardless of whether it is justified or not, Iran will not tolerate strategic or dramatic changes in Syria that will affect Iranian national interests, and Iran has deep geopolitical and economic interests in Syria. Israeli involvement in Syria disturbs Iran, and any change in the political situation that might favor Israel remains unacceptable to Iran.

While the Trump administration up until now has not indicated it would forfeit the JCPOA, their rhetoric suggests that they are still looking for ways to limit and even “punish” Iran for the regional role they play

Some participants claimed that Iran feels encircled in the region by the U.S. All the talk about containing Iran scares Iran, and as opposed to other members of the region, Iran is not part of any security arrangement like NATO or the GCC, and thus Iran views access to the Levant and Hizbullah as existential. Therefore, Iran seeks to preserve the existing geostrategic situation in Syria. Some participants added that Iran also realizes that the Raqqa operation is almost over and it is preparing for Deir al-Zour, because they want Deir al-Zour to remain on the “resistance axis”. However, this characterization of Iranian policy as a defensive strategy emanating from real threats was contested by other participants who pointed out the nature of the Iranian presence in Syria and Iraq. What is characterized as the resistance axis is as a matter of fact an influence zone used to gather power and disseminate the Iranian ideology of the revolution. It was suggested that Iran realized that it had the opportunity to gain significant influence over Syria and Iraq and is now taking the opportunity to carry its influence all the way to the Mediterranean. That is why it has fully seized on this opportunity to play at creating a regional leadership built on sectarian blocs.

Given this backdrop, participants suggested that Iran is probably not delusional and does not think Assad can once again rule over the whole country. However, Iran borders Afghanistan, where there is a weak state, and some parts of the country are ruled by the radicals or other groups, but the government still kind of keeps it together. Participants suggested that Iran has experience managing chaos and they are maybe looking for an Afghanistan-like scenario in Syria, which they can manage through their experience.

It was put forward that Saudi Arabia is waiting for the U.S. to deliver on its promise to “punish” Iran, and that only after then do the Riyadh imagines the political environment will be ripe to engage with Tehran

The Trump factor, however, has complicated the situation for Iran. The previous administration believed in multilateral diplomacy. While the Trump administration up until now has not indicated it would forfeit the JCPOA, their rhetoric suggests that they are still looking for ways to limit and even “punish” Iran for the regional role they play. Furthermore, this administration seems to be holding Iran responsible for problems in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Yemen and Syria seem inherently connected. Yemen is where the relationships with Saudi Arabia have run almost to a deadlock. Participants said that although Iran and Saudi had some recent interactions with their hajj deal and OPEC output cuts deals, Saudi Arabia remains bitter and does not intend to build a bilateral relationship with Iran. It was put forward that Saudi Arabia is waiting for the U.S. to deliver on its promise to “punish” Iran, and that only after then do the Riyadh imagines the political environment will be ripe to engage with Tehran. Given its transgressions into Yemen, the Saudi position in Syria is very much aimed at countering Iran. However,



they seem to have outsourced their Syria policy to the U.S. and now comply with the American position in Syria.

It seems like the PYD will not become an acceptable and legal entity in the Turkish perspective unless they cut their ties with the PKK and give up using the resources provided them for the fight in Syria to strengthen their affiliates' fight against Turkey in Turkish territories

On the issue of the position of another major actor in Syria, Turkey, some participants pointed out that Turkey has moral concerns in Syria but also reacts to emerging threats. Up until the Euphrates Shield operation, Turkey's policy could be characterized as one prioritizing a broader Syria policy that aimed at strengthening the opposition and ousting Assad. However, as the PYD became a reality in northern Syria, Turkey started to prioritize border security and its national interests. It was suggested that the rapprochement process with Russia following the jet crisis should be read as a response to Turkey's traditional ally, the U.S., choosing to work with the PYD and ignoring Turkish objections. Trying to secure the northern border was attempted late, but now that Euphrates Shield has been completed, Turkey aims to keep a permanent presence in the north. Still, how the PYD will react vis-à-vis Turkey remains a critical issue.

Turkey could join the forces they trained for the Free Syrian Army to the SDF, which would eventually dilute the YPG percentage below 30 percent. In this way, Turkey could help make the SDF more representative of Syrian people and more acceptable to Turkey's Syrian policy

Some participants brought up the subject of the possibility, should disruptive actions in Turkey originating from PYD held areas continue, that Turkey will take more direct

actions against PYD. Some of these disruptive actions include smuggling weapons given to the PYD for fighting ISIS to the PKK in Turkey, and training suicide bombers that operate in Turkey, etc. It seems like the PYD will not become an acceptable and legal entity in the Turkish perspective unless they cut their ties with the PKK and give up using the resources provided them for the fight in Syria to strengthen their affiliates' fight against Turkey in Turkish territories.

Some participants suggested that Turkey could join the forces they trained for the Free Syrian Army to the SDF, which would eventually dilute the YPG percentage below 30 percent. In this way, Turkey could help make the SDF more representative of Syrian people and more acceptable to Turkey's Syrian policy. It seems like Turkey does not and will not consider allowing the PYD to participate in the political process, both in Geneva and Astana, for the foreseeable future.

On broader Syria policy, Idlib seems to be a red line for Turkey, and territorial integrity another crucial item. Turkey's moral concerns also make it active in trying to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria, as depicted by health aid provided to affected Syrians after the chemical attack and evacuation deals brokered in the siege of Aleppo.

In terms of actors in Syria, Turkey is concerned that Russia and the U.S. converge on the issue of the PYD and YPG. Although Turkey does not agree with this Russian policy, it chooses to engage with Russia and keeps its communication channels open. Following this position, Turkey also chose to be active in Astana. Participants suggested that Turkish objections to Iran are more strategic than those of others, and that Turkey is especially concerned about post-Daesh Iraq and how much influence Iran will gain in the post-Daesh period.



Other Pressing Issues

It is not lost to anyone that the failed state reality in Syria created a power vacuum that gave rise to ISIS. However, the emergence of ISIS cannot solely be explained through this power vacuum: the need for transformative forces in the region also lies at the roots of this problem. It is important to realize that the uprisings that eventually transformed into a civil war started with the move for change. In this fight between status quo and change, unless there is another strong transformative force, it seems like radical groups will offer their version of change and will eventually thrive. ISIS will be defeated when fighting forces figure out what to do with the ISIS territories. However, unless the need for transformation is fulfilled, it seems like different radical groups with different agendas will emerge. Participants gave Iraq as an example to prove such a point. Iraq set the scenario where radical groups with different characteristics managed to emerge and grow in the same areas one after another over time because the Iraqi elite could not come up with the societal transformation that the public sought in the post-invasion period. ISIS needs to be defeated. However, seeing ISIS as a unique threat whose defeat would eradicate major radicalism issues in the region is based on a problematic logic that avoids considering their aforementioned root causes.

The emergence of ISIS cannot solely be explained through this power vacuum: the need for transformative forces in the region also lies at the roots of this problem

Another problem with this perception of ISIS is seeing the conflict from a security and terrorism perspective. ISIS and similar groups are side-effects of the crisis, not the causes of the crisis. This is not to say that ISIS is not a major problem: it is a very strong and detrimental side effect. However, being a side effect, defeating ISIS will not solve the Syrian

crisis. It is apparent that if we want to evaluate the options for Syria we need to reassess our understanding of the role of terrorism in the conflict. It seems that we have to digest the reality that terrorism is not the cause of the crisis in Syria, but one of the consequences of the conflict which exacerbates the situation.

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Endnotes:

1- De-escalation zones became active after the roundtable took place. The Russian Defense Ministry announced that they will keep attacking certain groups in Daraa and Hama regardless of the de-escalation zones. The regime had already been trying to penetrate de-escalation zones, and Russia perpetuating its own plan does set a successful example. Parts of Idlib have become operational de-escalation zones. <<http://www.nrttv.com/EN/Details.aspx?Jimare=14316>>

2- Obviously, there was also discussion of US domestic politics (the Russian probe, the new administration establishing red lines etc.) as factors that enabled the Al Shayat airport attack.

3- Westcott. "US missile strike took out 20% of Syria's airforce, Mattis claims". CNN. April 11, 2017. <<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/11/politics/syria-mattis-trump-strike-damage/index.html>>

4- Pentagon decided to surprise ISIL with announced troops, and with this reasoning, they stopped disclosing deployment information. <<https://www.rt.com/usa/383111-us-troops-deployment-isis-surprise/>>

The latest official number of troops before the discreet deployment decision was a little below 1,000 (including the 500 the Obama administration deployed). Then it was leaked that another 1,000 troops were to be sent. It is now estimated that there are about 2,000 American troops in Syria. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/03/15/u-s-military-probably-sending-as-many-as-1000-more-ground-troops-into-syria-ahead-of-raqa-offensive-officials-say/?utm_term=.a5ae19943b36>

5- Russian S-400 air defense systems also could be said to have deterred the U.S. from using jets for the attack.

6- Just days after our roundtable took place, President Trump approved the arming of the SDF and said that it was necessary for "complete victory."

7- On May 18, the U.S. attacked an Iran-backed pro-Assad militia convoy in southeastern Syria. The U.S. is seeking to prevent the regime and Iran gaining power in eastern Syria. Russia and

Iran seem to agree about the situation in western Syria, but Russia also remains skeptical of Iranian plans for the east. However, Russia still protested against the attack as they do not want to see the U.S. filling the void in the east. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/18/us-iran-jet-attack-syria>>

8- Deir al-Zour is also on the pathway of Sunni tribes in Iraq, so to influence and "control" the Sunni tribes, one needs to control Deir al-Zour.

9- The seasonal Muslim pilgrimage to the city of Mecca, which is in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.



EVENT DESCRIPTION

The Syrian civil war is one of the longest post-cold war ongoing conflicts, with a heavy toll on civilians, and with long-lasting effects on regional and international politics. There are multiple regional and international actors directly and indirectly involved in the conflict. As the crisis has changed shape and forms, these primary actors' policies and priorities have evolved as well. The recent chemical attack by the regime in Idlib and the ensuing US response have introduced new variables into the equation in Syria. At this stage, it is of paramount importance to evaluate the situation in Syria and analyse how the options and priorities of the Syrian, of regional and of international actors have changed. The round table aims to be both descriptive and prescriptive on the Syrian crisis.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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