

Syria: Who will Blink First?

Mona Alami

Abstract: As tensions rise in Idlib, the current political equilibrium in Syria no longer appears sustainable in the long run. The parties engaged there have various and often mutually exclusive goals. Europe is facing Syria fatigue and wants the problem to go away. Russia would like to further stabilize the country and start reaping the fruits of its Syria policy. Iran and the regime are still playing the long game, confident that their policy of inflexibility will continue to pay. Yet as in every game of chess, something must give eventually.

Introduction

On October 27, Turkey hosted¹ the leaders of Russia, France and Germany at a meeting seeking a political solution to the Syrian war. Despite commitments made to end the seven-year conflict, the meeting did not yield tangible results, with the various countries engaged in the process appearing to be comfortable in maintaining the status quo for now. The various regional players are however aware that the current equilibrium is not sustainable in the long run, and each side is waiting for the other to blink first.

At the closing of the conference, participants once again called for a political solution to the Syrian war. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan described the discussions as “fruitful and sincere,” adding that all four attendees had agreed to support a United Nations push to form a new constitutional committee for Syria by year’s end.

A final statement from the international leaders called for “an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process,” and the convening of a committee by the end of the year to work on constitutional reform before the organization of U.N.-backed free and fair elections. Participants in an earlier peace conference in Sochi, Russia had agreed to form a 150-member committee to rewrite the Syrian constitution. Noticeably absent from the summit was the U.S, which was apparently not invited by Turkey. The U.S is perceived as less inclined for compromise than Europe in Syria.² Yet, while the Istanbul summit did not achieve any new breakthroughs on a political solution in Syria, it reinforced the prominence of the Russian-sponsored Sochi and Astana processes over the U.N peace tracks and prioritized the enforcement of the Idlib agreement reached by Turkey and Russia in September.³

The conference comes in the wake of a reduction in violence across Syria, leaving Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies victorious. Yet, after seven years of a bloody conflict, the regime is now ruling over a fragmented country both geographically and politically. In Assad's own areas of support, regime power remains diffused despite efforts to consolidate it again, with state institutions operating alongside a wide range of militias that have helped in cracking down on the insurgency.

In Assad's own areas of support, regime power remains diffused despite efforts to consolidate it again, with state institutions operating alongside a wide range of militias that have helped in cracking down on the insurgency

The Complex Map of Syrian Actors

Assad family members have risen to the fore, Maher Assad, commander of the 4th Armored Division, is now considered as the second most important figure in Syria due to his military prowess. His cousin, Ramy Makhlof, controls a number of militias amounting in 2016 to 11,000 fighters under the Bustan Association label,⁴ which have been reorganized under the names Kataeb Jablawi, Ousoud Homs, and Diraa Watan.⁵ The regime has worked towards reclaiming its power by incorporating thousands of loyalist combatants into the state's volunteer-based armed forces, such as the 4th Assault Corps and the Russian backed 5th Assault Corps. However, the fact that many units have been incorporated on the unit level means that loyalty to the original founders remains strong. In addition, factions such as the 9th Regiment resulting from the reconciliation of opposition factions with the regime in areas such as Deraa have been integrated into the Syrian army

apparatus according to a recent article by Al-Modon⁶.

Business and military figures have also become influential in the new Syria. Oil tycoon Aymen Jaber, one of such figures, runs numerous private military companies and elite assault units, including Liwa Suqur al-Sahara (Desert Hawks) and the Syrian Marines, which was first disbanded and then reassigned to the 5th Voluntary Assault Corps according to the Russian International Council.⁷ Another prominent Syrian oil magnate close to the country's leadership is George Haswani, who owns the company HESCO and finances Dira Qalamoun, which is a part of the Syrian Army's 3rd Armored Division. "Another important business figure with much influence is Hussam Katerji," Syria expert Fabrice Balanche told this author. In the military, the commander of the Tiger forces, Souheil Hassan, has become a popular figure in regime areas alongside other more traditional figures such as the heads of the intelligence services Ali Mamlouk and Jamail Hassan, according to Syria expert Maan Talaa of Omran Disrasat. These leaders are each responsible for a large number of militias. Balanche underlines that the heads of Syrian intelligence and business people are each either allying themselves with Russia or Iran to protect their new-found influence in what has become the fragmented framework of Syrian power play, dominated by regional powers.

Besides power diffusion in the territory under his own control, Assad must also contend with a fragmented country. Violence in Syria has significantly decreased and is frozen in peripheral areas. The country is now carved up into four statelets, each backed by different international players



Besides power diffusion in the territory under his own control, Assad must also contend with a fragmented country. Violence in Syria has significantly decreased and is frozen in peripheral areas. The country is now carved up into four statelets, each backed by different international players. In the north western Idlib province, a deal brokered in September allowed for the setting up of a demilitarized zone running 15-20 km into rebel territory.⁸ The area is home to two main groups, the National Liberation Front coalition, which merged in August with Syrian Liberation Front⁹ and the jihadists Hayat Tahrir Sham. While it is unsure how long the Idlib deal will hold, Turkey has gained significant influence there by backing and overseeing directly coalitions such as the National Liberation Front, useful proxies that can be used in any future confrontation with the regime or in the framework of an escalation in the Idlib region. Its influence appears to be being prepared for the long haul in rural Aleppo, where it is rebuilding roads and schools as well as establishing new industrial areas.

The country's northeast has witnessed the emergence of the Democratic Federation for Northern Syria which is ruled over by multiple civil councils, headed by the political arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Syrian Democratic Council. The region includes also the Arab areas of Raqqa and Deir Zour provinces, both of which are ruled by civil councils. Raqqa for example has an Arab and Kurdish co-chair, and this form of governance was the result of a consensus between various factions. Last September, a new administration was created for northeastern Syria during a meeting for the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) in Ain Issa. The new administration will act as a coordinating body linking the self-

administrations of the Kurdish majority areas and the civil administrations in Arab majority areas that have their own civil councils.¹⁰ The north and eastern areas, which are rich in resources such as arable land and oil fields, are also home to around 2,000 U.S. advisers.

Competing International Interests

Multiple players are attempting to hedge their bets in the complex framework of the new Syria, namely Russia, France, Germany, Turkey, and Iran. Russian air power has been crucial in allowing Assad's forces to reclaim much of the country. Russia is now attempting to shape the peace, its main objective being to maintain influence over Damascus and to keep a strategic foothold in the Mediterranean close to NATO operational hubs. Russia knows that recouping its military investment on Syria requires a stable regime, something only achievable through reconstruction and reclaiming the country's east, which is rich in resources. According to the New York Times,¹¹ the United Nations special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has said that rebuilding Syria will cost at least \$250 billion. Reclaiming the east and carrying out this reconstruction would assist Assad financially and allow him to restore the social contract and force militia leaders to heed his wishes by giving them a direct stake in the process.

Russia also knows that no serious rebuilding will take place without the support of the West and more specifically Europe, and it is more inclined to negotiate than the U.S. After all, European governments have a big stake in the Syrian outcome if they hope to ever reverse the flow of refugees: a constant source of anxiety for many European politicians. "Russia and Iran may have won the war for Syria but neither has the



Russia also knows that no serious rebuilding will take place without the support of the West and more specifically Europe, and it is more inclined to negotiate than the U.S. After all, European governments have a big stake in the Syrian outcome if they hope to ever reverse the flow of refugees

deep pockets for reconstruction. Germany and maybe to a lesser extent France seem to have come forth with an initial fund to be directly allocated to reconstruction in exchange of the sustained lull in Idlib hence effectively preventing an additional and gigantic last wave of refugees to EU,” says Aydın Selcen, a Turkish political expert.

An official from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs who recently spoke to this author underlined that there was no appetite for reconstruction without a political solution. At the meeting, he said, French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated that there would be no real, sustainable, credible return of refugees if the political process was not initiated. A final statement from the leaders called for “an inclusive, Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process.”

Turkey, the foreign country hit the hardest by the Syria war, has been pushing for a deal. On the one hand it has now to grapple with the long-term presence of an autonomous Kurdish region on its border in the form of the Democratic Federation for Northern Syria, which it has directly linked with its nemesis the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). On the other, Turkey has had to take in 3.5 million refugees and see instability expand on its home turf, and it has been plagued over recent years by a series of terror bombings.

Playing the Long Game

Iran and the regime are playing the long game. Iran has much experience in proxy wars across the region, from Syria and Lebanon to Iraq and Yemen. By nature, and unlike Russia, Iran’s priority in Syria is not focused on state-building especially when it comes at the expense of its foreign influence. It views Syria as an essential layer in the maintenance of its regional power structure that stretches from Tehran to Lebanon. An unstable Syria heavily reliant on Tehran is thus in its interests. The regime’s main priority has so far been survival, and despite the immense destruction and instability plaguing its country, it sees itself rightly as having won the bet.

Assad, who inherited a resilient regime from his father and predecessor, Hafez Assad, has been able to play the geopolitical game astutely with the support of a system of loyalists, many of them fellow Alawis who believe he has overcome the worst. After all, his security services have remained loyal and defections have been mostly limited to lower officers, with only a few high-profile defections, such as prime minister Riad Hijab, Republican Guard General Manaf Tlass, and Jihad Makdissi, the foreign ministry’s spokesman. Assad’s insistence on labeling the revolution as a conspiracy against his country and a jihadist insurgency has allowed him to enjoy continuous ideological support in some tranches of the population and to paralyze Western efforts towards any solution.

In the absence of a radical move by Washington, which is always possible given Trump’s mercurial personality, Assad and Iran are the least likely to blink, despite renewed sanctions on Iran, which is also facing an unprecedented economic crisis



The great unknown in this complex equation is how far Washington is willing to go. While the U.S. was absent from the Turkey summit, it has made clear one of its main objectives in Syria is to isolate and oppose Iran and roll-back its influence there. The Trump administration appears to favor an indirect approach by weakening Iran financially, increasing sanctions on Tehran and its proxies and setting fresh red lines. When the Assad regime stated it was launching an offensive to take back Idlib, the Trump administration threatened military strikes, with U.S. President Donald Trump warning Syrian President Bashar Assad that he “must not recklessly attack Idlib”, and that doing so would make the United States “very angry”¹².

In the absence of a radical move by Washington, which is always possible given Trump’s mercurial personality, Assad and Iran are the least likely to blink, despite renewed sanctions on Iran, which is also facing an unprecedented economic crisis. Iran’s currency has lost two-thirds of its value over recent months, much of it after the United States formally withdrew from the nuclear agreement in May. Yet despite its many tribulations Iran will remain resilient in Syria thanks to its long game approach. Iran favors a low-cost piecemeal approach that allows it to build power slowly over the long term, relying on creating loyalty within paramilitary proxies that will gradually merge with national institutions in a semi-state actor form.

Iran appears to now be relying on Hezbollah to train opposition groups that have reconciled with the regime before they are integrated into the Syrian army, thus ensuring direct oversight and the creation of personal relations between its Lebanese proxy and emerging army

units.¹³ More U.S. financial pressure over Tehran could translate into reduced funding into the Syrian project without bringing it to a halt unless more stringent military measures are undertaken by Washington against Iranian expansion in Syria. And if it feels increasingly cornered, Iran and the regime could escalate in Idlib, which has been the scene once again of renewed clashes, to put pressure on Europe and on the wider international community. The latter appears to have started taking the bait. The statement released at the end of the Turkish summit highlighted “the need to create conditions throughout the country for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their original places of residence in Syria, underlined that the returnees need security from armed conflict, political persecution or arbitrary arrests as well as humanitarian infrastructure, including water, electricity, health and social services.”

While Europe might refuse to cover full reconstruction for now, it might be more amenable to give aid based on a project basis in areas with large refugee populations. Europe’s official line may remain in support of a political transition in Syria as per UN Security Council Resolution 2254, but German and French inflexibility toward Assad is being challenged by anti-refugee sentiment and the rise of the far right. Russia will also push for European concessions in Syria, as it wants the country to stabilize on the long run, in order to secure its return on investment. Thus, Russia and Europe are the most likely in the long run to work on some sort of compromise, but how will it be implemented remains to be seen, given Assad and Iran’s piecemeal approach to the conflict. For now however, Syria will remain a frozen conflict, until local events—possibly in Idlib—destabilize once again the balance of power.



Endnotes

- 1- https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/at-syria-summit-russian-and-nato-leaders-come-up-with-few-answers/8/27/10/2018ac26b-72d11-920e-8384-8bcc5492fef49_story.html?utm_term=.fdae95820071
- 2- <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/us-representative-for-syria-were-not-going-to-put-this-country-back-together/>
- 3- Lund, Aron, After the Rurkey Russia deal, the fate of Odlib hangs in the balance, October 2018 2, Irin, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/02/10/2018/after-russia-turkey-deal-fate-syria-s-idlib-hangs-balance>
- 4- Syria businessmen invest in post-war reconstruction, Younes Ahmad, June 2016 5, The Arab Weekly, <https://thearabweekly.com/syrias-businessmen-invest-post-war-reconstruction>
- 5- Aymen Jawad Tamimi <http://www.aymennjawad.org/08/2016/bibliography-pro-assad-militias>
- 6- <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/10/11/2018/%D%8AF%D%8B%1D%8B%9D%8A-%D%8AD%D%8B%2D%8A%-8D%8A%7D%84%9D%84%9D%-87%9D8%9A%D%8B%4D%8B%1D-81%9%D%8B%9D%84%9D%-89%9D%8AA%D%8AF%D%8B%1D8%9A%D%8A-8%D%81%9D%8B%5D%8A%7D%8A%6D%-84%9D%8A%7D%84%9D%8AA%D%8B%3D%88%9D8%9A%D%8A9>
- 7- Who controls Syria, The Assad family, the inner circle and tycoon Kiril Smenov, The Russian International Affairs Council.
- 8- Syrian Jihadists signal acceptance of Idlib deal, 14 October 2018, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib/syrian-jihadists-signal-acceptance-of-idlib-deal-idUSKCN1MOoSQ>
- 9- Idlib Province and the future of instability in Syria, Maxwel Markusen, September 2018 22, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/idlib-province-and-future-instability-syria>
- 10- <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c9e03dab4-6265-a9a91-ee-ea8d2a93c657>
- 11- Help Assad, or leave Syria in Runs, the politics of rebuilding Syria, Somini Sengupta.
- 12- <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/idlib-crisis-prompts-us-to-take-a-new-tack-on-syria1.770906->
- 13- <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/10/11/2018/%D%8AF%D%8B%1D%8B%9D%8A-%D%8AD%D%8B%2D%8A%-8D%8A%7D%84%9D%84%9D%-87%9D8%9A%D%8B%4D%8B%1D-81%9%D%8B%9D%84%9D%-89%9D%8AA%D%8AF%D%8B%1D8%9A%D%8A-8%D%81%9D%8B%5D%8A%7D%8A%6D%-84%9D%8A%7D%84%9D%8AA%D%8B%3D%88%9D8%9A%D%8A9>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mona Alami is a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Her research focuses on non-state armed actors

Mona Alami is a senior nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. She is also a fellow with TRENDS Research & Advisory . She follows political and economic issues in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Sudan, and the Gulf. She writes extensively on Lebanese politics, Hezbollah, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, and Salafism in general. Alami holds an MBA from the Lebanese American University, and is currently completing her PhD in geopolitics at Lumière University Lyon 2. She writes in English, French, and Arabic.

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.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6
No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org



منتدى الشرق
ALSHARQ FORUM