

Syria's Future

The Syrian crisis is slowly reaching its seventh year. Violence, radicalization, civil displacement, fragmentation and deterioration of the Syrian society are reaching unprecedented levels. International and regional actors, thus far, have largely failed in their attempts to reach a compromise or a sustainable solution in order to control the crisis and quell the radical groups which are running rampant across the region. Despite Russian, Turkey's and Iranian latest effort to reach some-kind of peaceful agreement, the situation on the ground still remains very turbulent. Assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey, renewed IS advance in the east of the country and the constant refusal by the insurgent groups for any kind of deal with the government are showing a rather grim picture of the future.

In order to understand the Syrian future we need to analyse key actors which are active at the moment and will be part of the country's future. But before that we need to map out the key drivers of the Syrian conflict:

- **High level of foreign involvement.** After the initial uprising during the Arab Spring various regional and global powers saw their opportunity in Syria. Funding and supporting "the rebel" forces the foreign powers quickly turned Syria into a proxy-war area.
- **Instrumentalization and radicalization of sectarian, ethnic and religious identities.** Armed actors along media organizations have managed to abuse these identities in order to accomplish their narratives. Relations between Sunni and Shia as well as Sunni and Alawites have deteriorated rapidly during the conflict. These deteriorating relations were quickly exploited by the government as well as terrorist forces in order to recruit or justify their actions.¹
- **Rise of the Islamic State.** Rise of this rouge state is a new phenomena in security and global politics. The Islamic State acts as a beacon for various jihadists across the globe as well as a tool which can be employed to destabilize the region. The fact that this entity still exists proves that various global players see it as an instrument that can still serve their interests.
- **Highly fragmented opposition forces.** After the initial rise of Free Syrian Army (FSA) the opposition forces began to crumble away. Further fragmentation of these forces allowed radical groups to "kidnap" the revolution. At present "moderate opposition" usually refers to groups which are at different levels of extremism and Salafist Jihadism.

Main actors in the Syrian conflict include: President Assad and the Syrian forces, Russia, US and its allies, Iran and Hezbollah, Turkey, Kurdish forces and various opposition or terrorist groups

¹ ARK Group DMCC February 2016, *The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis* p 48.

including the Islamic State. Conflicting interests and agendas between these actors is also one of the key factors that push the Syrian crisis further.

At the moment President Assad, along with the Syrian Arab Army, is the only legitimate and legal force in the country. Despite constant accusations and calls for his removal Assad is the only force that can maintain some kind of order across the Syrian state. Even the Western powers who were the most persistent at their calls for removing Mr. Assad are now changing their tone. At this moment any kind of political transition would need to include the regime forces and the Syrian government in order to establish a stable situation on the ground. However, Syria as it was established by the colonial powers will be reshaped and this process will require certain degree of cession from the government. Centralized Syria as it once was will be decentralized in the future for a couple of reasons. Firstly, certain parts of the country have been cut off from the rest of the state and the capital for quite some time. During this period areas which had been cut off have established a certain degree of "governance" either on their own or pressured by the militants. Secondly, though there seems to be an overwhelming support for the government at the moment (mainly because of the current situation) people will demand certain political changes when the crisis is resolved. These political changes will include democracy, civil liberties etc. and most probably decentralized state. Finally the Kurds which have proven to be an excellent ally against the Islamic State and have managed to free much of the northern parts of Syria will influence the decentralization process. Decentralization is nothing unusual moreover it can be often seen in many countries which have gone through a civil war, economic and political crisis or something similar.

Many would say that Russia and the US are using Syria as another battleground to wage a proxy war and weigh their power. Though this is accurate to some extent (global powers have always used similar situations to indirectly measure their strength), there are other goals and interests that aren't visible at the first glance. Main Russian interests in Syria are focused on restraining Islamist radicalism (Salafism and Jihadism) so it won't spill over to Caucasus and destabilize the region; also positioning itself in Syria Russia will be able to secure its presence in the Mediterranean Sea via Latakia and Tartus naval bases. For Moscow both of these goals have a great strategic significance. Likewise in order to complete or secure these interests Russia will be involved in the shaping of the future Syrian state.

The US interests are somewhat vague. Although they are promoting democracy and free society the unwillingness to deliberately resolve the problem of Islamic State (at least in Iraq) is smearing their "good guy" image. Further US involvement in the Syrian crisis will be determined by the next US President and its politics towards Israel and Saudi Arabia as major regional allies. Washington may withdraw from the Syrian crisis and leave these issues to be resolved by other more involved players (such are Iran, Turkey and Russia). Though this might sound reasonable it will echo very badly in the region as well as in the global politics for the US global supremacy. Action such as this may possibly signify that the US has finally acknowledged the emerging multi-polar world. The other path suggests that the Washington will try to implement its own

visions of the future Syria by strengthening its presence in the region (not involving Turkey in the process). Sadly at this point it is very ungrateful to predict the moves of the next American President, since he will take office at the end of January. Whatever the results of the Syrian crisis are the US presence in the region won't simply disappear. CENTCOM still covers the whole Middle-Eastern and Central-Asian area and it is at the intersection of three continents inhabited by more than half a billion of people. No global power would ever easily withdraw from a similar strategic area.

Main goal for Tehran is to maintain a pro-Iranian government in Syria. This doesn't necessarily need to include President Assad as long as there is a Shia orientated regime, something similar to Iraq. Iran mainly sees Syria as a gateway to Lebanon and a stable support for the Shia population and Hezbollah in that country. If somehow the future government of Syria has an anti-Iranian stance the position of Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as in the region would be seriously threatened. In that manner Iran will be ready to make certain concessions in order to maintain its presence in the region.

In the past couple of years Turkey has had a very interesting foreign policy. From opposing the Syrian government and Russian intervention while supporting insurgent groups in the northern part of the country, to implementing cooperative peace deals with Russia and Iran trying to resolve the Syrian crisis. Turkey can make a great political impact in Syria and Iraq, though it is playing a dangerous forth and back game between the West and Russia. The situation in the region has direct consequences on Turkish security and overall stability of the country, naturally one of the main goals would be to stabilize the situation and suppress future terrorist efforts in the region. The second goal is to restrain the Kurdish forces and its progression along the Turkey-Syria border. This will be very important since the Kurds in Syria will try to acquire some kind of autonomy in the future. Finally if the Turkey succeeds in its foreign policy and emerges as a victor in the Syrian crisis its influence will spread much further. Revivification of the Ottoman power will be possible if Turkey plays its cards right.

The Kurdish forces in Syria have had a remarkable success in the northern part of the country. Fighting the Islamic State YPG managed to reclaim much of the border region with Turkey and establish some kind of autonomy thus providing a stable hub for further operations against the terrorists. Relations with the US are also an important factor for the Kurds. During this year the US special forces have actually managed to get on the ground thanks to the YPG. These US-Kurdish relations can potentially influence the future demands for the Kurdish autonomy. Although this is a primary goal for the Kurdish people absolute autonomy will be more or less impossible to achieve. Allowing any kind of a higher level of autonomy for the Kurds in Syria would automatically trigger a similar reaction for the Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. However, decentralization is the most probable outcome for the Syrian state therefore the Kurds can expect a seat in the future government and a regional autonomy within the country.

Although there are still years ahead before the Syrian crisis is absolutely resolved we can expect a positive shift in the near future. Of course this will be determined by the regional actors and the future American administration. Nevertheless there are two issues that can further derive from the Syrian crisis and potentially be exploited. Firstly there is the Islamic State and various fighting groups across Syria. These extremists won't simply disappear. Some of them will return home which will further complicate those country's security situation (especially in Europe) and others will seek more suitable regions to continue their operations (North Africa most likely). The second issue that may potentially destabilize the region is the Kurdish question. In Iraq and Syria the Kurds have been fighting extremists since the beginning of the conflict's escalation. Even so regional powers haven't showed any respect nor gratitude towards these actions. Furthermore Ankara's violent actions against the Kurds are heating up the hostilities. External players may exploit the Kurdish issue for autonomy if the regional powers can't resolve this problem. This can be especially problematic for Turkey since President Erdogan is clearly trying to shift the country's foreign policy and change its traditional allies.

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