

Syria: The Diplomatic Endgame

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Wars are always concluded with political settlements. In the endgame over Syria, Russia has worked directly with Turkey, to agree on orderly evacuations of the NATO-backed terrorist groups from Aleppo and, with Iran, is now engaged in talks on a wider resolution to the failing war on Syria.

The exclusion of Washington from these talks reflects new realities on the ground, with Syria's key allies helping Turkey's President Erdoğan look for a way out. The US practice of backing al Qaeda groups to overthrow the Syria Government has failed. Nevertheless, a door at the talks in Astana (Kazakhstan) has been left open for the new Trump administration, which claims commitment to withdrawal from Syria and better relations with Russia.

The Syrian Army's liberation of Aleppo has forced all sides to reconsider their strategy.

Many question whether Turkish President Erdoğan can be trusted. That, in my view, is not the right question – even though the Turkish leader remains a key sponsor of terrorism in Syria. He is certainly not trustworthy, and has been reported as planning coordinated terrorist attacks through both Nusra and ISIS (while pretending to fight both), to strengthen his position against Russia at the talks. But he too has to face some hard realities. Syria has not been broken.

Syria's President Assad has no relationship with Erdoğan, considering him 'an abnormal and psychologically disturbed person'. However Assad still hopes that others, in particular Russia, may influence the Turkish leader to change his stance towards Syria.

Turkey is Syria's largest neighbour, with 800 km of border and – with a new regime due in Washington on 20 January – the most intransigent obstacle to ending the war on Syria.

Even with Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Douma retaken by the Syrian Army, the country could suffer terrorism for years to come, if Turkey continued to facilitate the entry of foreign jihadists into Syria. Sooner or later, with or without Erdoğan, Syria and Turkey must have some sort of agreement.

Naturally, whoever has the upper hand on the ground has the strongest position at peace talks. That is certainly Russia and Syria, at the moment. But it also raises concerns of further attacks before the 23 January talks, to strengthen Erdoğan's hand.

Intrigues in the western and Israeli media constantly suggest splits between Russia, Syria, Hezbollah and Iran. For example US and Israeli sources (such as Stratfor, linked to Israeli

intelligence) claim that Russia cannot afford to keep supporting Syria and that there are serious splits within the Syrian alliance. These seem to be mostly wishful thinking.

Iran remains firmly behind Syria. The Islamic Republic's representative at the Astana talks, Ali Akbar Velayati, reinforces Syria's consistent line that those Syrian fighters (not foreigners) who are willing to lay down their arms can take advantage of a peace process. However the internationally proscribed groups ISIS, al Nusra and the foreign fighters will play 'no part in the negotiations'. Russia, similarly, has shown little variation from its stated position.

The two key themes at Astana are a ceasefire and a political settlement. There was little progress in either at Geneva, where the Obama administration remained determined to remove the Assad-led government and impose a Saudi Arabian-backed exile group.

Past ceasefires have also been controversial for Syrians, who saw al Qaeda groups seizing the opportunity to regroup. However, in an interview with al-Watan newspaper, the Syrian President pointed out that ceasefires held more advantages than disadvantages. He said the Syrian Government had always agreed to the principle of truces because (i) they allowed civilians to escape, (ii) they allowed humanitarian aid to enter and (iii) they gave the terrorist groups 'an opportunity to rethink their position. Overall a ceasefire 'provides an opportunity for less destruction.'

On the other side, President Assad said it was clear that the big powers 'want to give terrorists an opportunity to breathe, strengthen their positions and send logistic supplies'. However he insists that 'truces were useful to us in order to prove to all ... that these states [that pretend to not back terrorism] are lying.'

Concerns have been expressed over the political settlement, that Syria's allies might allow some sort of 'soft coup' against the government, or weakening of the nation through federalisation. Russian analyst Andrew Korybko, for example, says that there are 'forces within the tripartite [Russia, Turkey and Iran] which truly believe that the 'federalization' (internal partition) of Syria and a soft regime change against President Assad are to Syria's long term and sustainable benefit'.

Certainly there is a lot of western talk about federalisation (effectively Washington's 'Plan B' for Syria) but it is hard to see substance in it from Syria's allies. Iran has never suggested it and Turkey definitely does not want to see a Kurdish entity on its border.

Russia these days is itself a federation and there has been speculation that the Russia Government's support for the Kurds might mean it is sympathetic to the idea. However we should observe that, while Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has mentioned the idea, he did not promote it. President Putin, at his marathon press conference on 23 December, ducked a similar question from an Iraqi Kurd. Both Putin and Lavrov have re-stated the principled position that the Syrian people must decide on any constitutional change.

From the Syrian side President Assad says federalism is unconstitutional, would require a referendum vote and that most Syrians (including most Kurds) would be against it. Further, he is emphatic that Russia has not tried to 'lean on' Syria: 'not once have the Russians [or the Soviet Union] tried to impose anything on us, even when there were differences, including Syria's role in Lebanon.'

When al Watan asked Assad about the problem of sects and community divisions he replied that he was concerned about this 'before the war ... [but] after one year and then two years the picture became clear. I believe that today the social structure of Syrian society has become purer than it was before the war ... now it distinguishes between religion and fanaticism, between religion and sectarianism.' That is, the Syrian President remains optimistic that the sectarianism provoked by the terrorist groups has been widely rejected by the Syrian people.

None of this excludes the possibility, as suggested by Korybko, that some form of concession such as 'municipal autonomy' might be given to the regions, in a political settlement. There were some important political and constitutional changes during the conflict, not least the inclusion of non-Baathist political players, and further changes seem likely.

The regional implications of the failing war are far reaching. Former London Mayor Ken Livingstone observes that the US has 'spectacularly failed' in its objectives, undermining its reputation in the entire region following the disasters of Iraq, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan, which have left a legacy of instability and large scale terrorism. That problem has to be addressed by the peoples of the region, in some coordinated way.

But what mechanisms exist for regional action? The Arab League has shrunk to little more than a forum for the Gulf monarchies (the GCC), after several of its members funded and armed the attacks on Libya and Syria. Some new regional grouping seem likely to displace it, and necessary to deal with any future threats.

The Syrian view these days is upbeat. Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mikdad hopes the Astana talks will help eliminate terrorism and hold its supporters to account. Presidential adviser Dr Bouthaina Shaaban goes further, asserting that Syria, Iran and their Resistance allies 'will lead the future of the region', against terrorism and foreign intervention. She points to a changing and supportive global environment, with a shift in power away from the USA and towards Russia and China and their allies.

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