

CIVIL CONFLICT AND INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION IN SYRIA AT THE END OF 2019: RUSSIA'S UPPER HAND IN NORTHEASTERN SYRIA

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Abstract: This brief glimpse into the eight years of the Syrian civil war helps us understand how the country turned into a field of rivalry between the regional and major powers. Also, we see how the Kurds resisted the establishment of the 'caliphate' in the northeastern part of the country. The latest developments at the end of 2019 in the northeastern part of Syria, lead us to the conclusion that five years since the Syrian apparatus avoided the risk of collapse and after the forceful intervention of Russia in the Syrian crisis, the position of the Russian-Syrian axis has been strengthened.

1. Introduction: The Syrian civil conflict so far (2011-2019)

At the beginning of 2011, Syria, unlike other Arab countries which were experiencing the effects of the Arab Spring, remained peaceful and free of major political turmoil. However, within a short period of time the country was driven to the verge of massive civil conflict due to the limited-range rioting incidents and the unaudited exercise of state violence.¹ As the regime's resolve towards the policy of inclusiveness declined, both sectarian and class grievances escalated.²

Fueled by the increasing social and political turmoil, on the eve of the uprising, the conservative opposition moved to overthrow the Baath regime. These actions were done in collaboration with various conservative armed groups, the jihadist militancy camp³, the Muslim Brotherhood⁴ and other segments of the opposition's organised armed factions. In response, the army attempted to assume control by

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¹ David W. Lesch, *Syria: A Modern History* (Wiley, 2019).

² Raymond Hinnebusch, "Sectarianism and Governance in Syria," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 19, no. 1 (April 2019): 41-66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12288>.

³ Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴ Dara Conduit, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

deploying tanks and other military forces to several major cities of the country. The Syrian civil war had just started.⁵

During the same period, an armed group with a radical socio-political agenda came to the forefront of developments in Iraq and Syria. This group, which came to be known as ISIS, aimed to establish a new Islamic caliphate in the territories of Iraq and southeast Syria. As William Harris mentions:

"On 29 June 2014, ISIS leader Baghdadi ascended the minbar of the great mosque in Mosul to present himself as the caliph. To the outsider, ISIS military and organisational expertise in addition to initial popularity with many of the 6 million or more Sunni Arabs within its new territory seemed to give it a chance of viability."⁶

At the same time, the Kurdish autonomy movement emerged as a major player in the region's political and military developments. The movement's units were the only armed groups which effectively resisted the rapid spread of the jihadist forces. Furthermore, the Kurds were implementing a program of radical democracy⁷ and political autonomy⁸ in those regions which they liberated from the Islamic State with the help of foreign actors.

"On September 2014, the small northern Syrian city of Kobane became a battleground between the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the People's Protection Units (Yek[^]ineye[^]n Parastina Gel-YPG). Kobane would change the fate of the Syrian war for not only these two major violent non-state actors that have emerged from the ongoing Syrian conflict but also for regional and international actors engaged both diplomatically and militarily in the conflict."⁹

In mid-2015, the Kurds' fight against the Islamic State was at its peak. Concurrently, the Syrian army was pushing against various armed forces, while the country's government was at the verge of total collapse. At that point, the Deus ex machina entered the stage. The Russian intervention¹⁰ caused a radical change of developments. As Lesch describes:

"On 30 September 2015, Russia began a sustained air campaign against Syrian opposition positions (and in essence) became the Syrian air force. As a result, Syrian and pro-government forces were able to go on the offensive

⁵ Lesch, *Syria*.

⁶ William Harris, *Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷ Simin Fadaee and Camilla Brancolini, "From National Liberation to Radical Democracy: Exploring the Shift in the Kurdish Liberation Movement in Turkey," *Ethnicities* 19, no. 5 (October 2019): 858–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819826146>.

⁸ Joost Jongerden, "Governing Kurdistan: Self-Administration in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria," *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (January 2019): 61–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1525166>.

⁹ *Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War: The ISIS and YPG Cases* (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017).

¹⁰ Moritz Pieper, "'Rising Power' Status and the Evolution of International Order: Conceptualising Russia's Syria Policies," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 3 (March 16, 2019): 365–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1575950>.

and retake some territory. The Russian military intervention did reactivate a scattered process of diplomacy."¹¹

The Russian intervention caused the international competition in Syria to intensify. In this context, Teheran, for its own particular reasons, followed in Moscow's steps by also rendering assistance to the Syrian regime.¹² The analysis of the role and aims which the many foreign actors had in the Syrian crisis goes beyond the scope of this study.

Nevertheless, the interference of the United States in the Syrian civil war opposite to the camp of Russia, Iran and Syria, demands special mention. In the said context, the US and the allied forces decided, after a period of wavering, to adequately supported the Kurds in the fight against the Islamic State. As Phillips argues:

"The U.S. swiftly recognised the symbolic importance of Kobane in halting ISIS' seemingly unstoppable advance and launched multiple airstrikes in support of the YPG from early October. This greatly aided the YPG's survival and also put the U.S. in contact with the previously unknown force, an effective, secular, indigenous force."¹³

Furthermore, the role of Turkey which has also emerged as one of the important players in the Syrian crisis and the greater region calls for particular reference. Over the past eight years, Turkey has moved back and forth between the abovementioned opposing camps following the shifts in its foreign policy.¹⁴ Factors such as the internal political developments, the vision of the ruling conservative alliance for the future of the region, and the State's traditional hostility towards the Kurdish claims, have wavered on Turkey's strategy.¹⁵

"Initially, no one focused on a military operation into Syria because Libya's war had not yet yielded results and an alternative structure to Assad was not viable. Instead, Turkey's role came to the fore when efforts were made to increase international pressure on Assad. When Turkey aligned herself with its Western allies, the situation changed, and the new Ottomans quickly dreamed of becoming masters of Damascus."¹⁶

¹¹ Lesch, *Syria*.

¹² Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, "Iran's Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (1 March 2019): 341–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy271>.

¹³ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (Yale University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Ajdin Đidić and Hasan Kösebalaban, "Turkey's Rapprochement with Russia: Assertive Bandwagoning," *The International Spectator* 54, no. 3 (3 July 2019): 123–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1627070>; Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds* (Pluto Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Ajdin Đidić and Hasan Kösebalaban, "Turkey's Rapprochement with Russia: Assertive Bandwagoning," *The International Spectator* 54, no. 3 (3 July 2019): 123–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1627070>; Thomas Schmidinger, *Rojava: Revolution, War and the Future of Syria's Kurds* (Pluto Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Fehim Taştekin, *Suriye: Yıkıl Git, Diren Kal! : Alacakaranlıkta Ortadoğu* (İletişim Yayınları, 2015).

2. Northeastern Syria at the end of 2019

a. Russia's upper hand

The brief glimpse into the eight years of the Syrian civil war leads to the interesting conclusion that the conflict which began as an internal issue transformed within a short period into an international conflict. Regional and major powers used Syria as field for their rivalries where their strengths and weaknesses were tested. At the same time, the threat of the 'caliphate's' establishment in the northeastern part of the country caused the Kurds to surface as a key regional player.

The perpetuation of the civil conflict in the form of confrontation between domestic and foreign factors, and the distinct socio-political context that emerged during the last five years in the northeastern part of Syria are factors which have substantial impact on the new correlation of power.

Turkey's third invasion of the northeastern part of Syria (after the invasion of the Jarabous-Al-Bab axis and the Afrin) had a significant influence on the correlation of forces in the region. Towards the end of September 2019, the Turkish Security Council approved the new invasion despite the international power's strong reaction.¹⁷ The Kurds, that controlled the northeastern part of Syria, in the face of a direct attack from Turkey turned to their familiar allies in the U.S. However, the U.S. indecision led the Kurdish movement to search alternative solutions. Thus, the Kurds turned to Russia which responded by offering air cover and facilitating an approach with the Syrian regime. This resulted in the return of the Syrian Arab Army to territories from which it withdrew six years ago.¹⁸ In the meantime, when the Turkish invasion of northeastern Syria began, the United States, on the one hand threatened Ankara with new sanctions and on the other began seeking compromising solutions.

According to informal communications circulating when this analysis was written, Moscow's decisive intervention was crucial for the future of the Turkish invasion.¹⁹ Russia, on the one hand accelerated the deployment of Syrian forces in the rest of the country based on the new agreement reached between the Kurdish movement and Damascus. On the other hand, Russian diplomatic manoeuvres initially facilitated Turkey's agreement with the U.S. for a temporary cease-fire (meanwhile, Washington intensified the withdrawal of its forces from Syria). Furthermore, by the end of October, Moscow secured an agreement with Ankara, which halted Turkey's aggression in the Syrian cities of Tell Abyad and Ras Al-Ayn and gave the control of new areas in the northeastern part of Syria to Damascus.²⁰

¹⁷ Murat Yetkin, "Russia helps Turkey-U.S. deal, takes control in Syria," Yetkin Report, 22 October 2019, <https://yetkinreport.com/2019/10/22/russia-helps-turkey-u-s-deal-takes-control-in-syria/>.

¹⁸ Yetkin.

¹⁹ Yetkin.

²⁰ Νικόλαος Στέλγιας, "Ανάλυση: Η Διπλωματική Επιτυχία Πούτιν, Τα Κέρδη Ερντογάν Και Άσαντ," Kathimerini.com.cy, accessed 23 October 2019,

These developments radically modified the correlation of power and strengthened Russia's position in the military and diplomatic field of Syria. As the process of political solution in the form of talks for the creation of a new constitution in Syria (with the exception of Idlib which is controlled by conservative opposition groups) is about to begin, Russia is counting its profits. First, the Syrian government re-assumed the control of several of the country's regions.²¹ Second, Damascus and Moscow extend their radius of action to areas that have rich energy deposits. Third, the Kurds were forced into compromise. Fourth, the collaboration between Russia and Turkey, which is a NATO member, is intensified. Fifth, the U.S. is facing significant problems in the region whilst Russia's position is reinforced. And, sixth the jihadi's forces continue to weaken.

b. USA's and Turkey's manoeuvres

The change in the correlation of forces in a way that strengthens the position of Russia and its allies in the geo-strategic chessboard of Syria is linked by a chain of developments. First, the USA, which until recently controlled the southeastern part of Syria based on their cooperation with the Kurds, are revising their strategy for the region.

According to recent studies from American strategic centres which are close to Donald Trump, during the new period the U.S., apart from tackling the new refugee waves, should focus on dealing with the Islamic State and Iran:

"The U.S. has limited interests, capabilities and influence in the Syrian conflict. We should use those wisely. If Turkey holds to the 30-mile limit it set for the incursion, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will still control significant territory, which includes the facilities detaining the bulk of the ISIS fighters. We should continue to support the YPG as long as they continue to partner with us in fighting ISIS and detaining ISIS fighters. (At the same time, we should) keep the Iranians and their surrogates out (of Syria)."²²

Although Turkey's final intentions for Syria had not been clarified, when this study was written, several analyses concluded that Turkey, like the U.S., was also moving towards reviewing its objectives in Syria. Following the model applied in the northern part of Cyprus after 1974, Turkey has limited the scope of its plans for the northeastern part of Syria to the securing of a buffer zone. The objective is to re-settle Syrian refugees and groups which are adjacent to Ankara's positions. According to analysts, if this buffer zone fails to evolve into an

<https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/kosmos/i-diplomatiki-epityxia-toy-poytin-ta-kerdi-erntogan-kai-asant>.

²¹ "Турецкое Наступление Объединяет Сирию," *Коммерсантъ*, accessed 21 October 2019, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4125100>.

²² James Carafano, "In Syria, Global Spotlight Should Be on Turkey, Not Trump," The Heritage Foundation, accessed 21 October 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/commentary/syria-global-spotlight-should-be-turkey-not-trump>.

alternative state structure, Turkey intends to use as a bargaining chip for participating in the process of creating the new Syrian constitution.²³

3. Conclusion: New correlation of power during the perpetuation of the Syrian 'tragedy'

The ongoing developments discussed above lead us to conclude that the Russian-Syrian axis has not only been strengthened, but, moreover, its latest 'gains' are remarkable.

During the new period, the U.S. and Turkey are facing significant challenges. The increase of Iran's influence in the region and the estimate that no one can guarantee the ultimate defeat of the Islamic State worry Washington. At the same time, Turkey has to overcome several internal and external obstacles, such as its ongoing economic crisis and the Russian factor, to implement its plans for Syria.

In any case, during the new period Russia has undoubtedly the upper hand in the new phase of the Syrian conflict. However, this should not lead us to premature conclusions. Both internal balances in the alliance led by Russia, e.g. Tehran's different plans, and several external factors, such as Turkey's unpredictable moves or the prospect of the Islamic State re-strengthening, complicate Russia's plans and perpetuate the crisis in Syria.

²³ الحدو ريزان "القبرصي السيناريو جرابه من يخرج إردوغان الحاوي", 19 October, 2019, <http://www.almayadeen.net//articles/opinion/1352588/الحدو-ريزان-القبرصي-السيناريو-جرابه-من-يخرج-إردوغان-الحاوي>.