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Syria after the Russian Intervention

Moscow Tips the Military Balance in Favor of the Regime, Pursues Parallel Diplomacy

Khaled Yacoub Oweis

Russian airstrikes turned the tide of the conflict in favor of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Moscow announced a reduction in its military presence in Syria in March 2016 but has maintained its infrastructure in the country while continuing to build up Assad's forces. The cessation of hostilities achieved through a deal between the United States and Russia has lessened the number of attacks against civilians and curbed fighting, but rebel areas remain under siege. At the same time, Russia has been keen to display its interest in an international, cooperative solution. Regardless of whether Moscow's intentions are sincere or mere lip service, the peace talks underway in Geneva, could provide Germany and the European Union with means to bolster the ceasefire. They should push for a solution that curbs the security sector and other tools of repression, which are dominated by Assad's Alawite minority, rather than for a mere change of personnel at the leadership level. Without such substantial change, the dynamics prompting the influx of refugees is unlikely to change substantially.

Despite many misgivings, the Syrian opposition had little choice but to attend the negotiations currently underway in Geneva. On the one hand, Russian air support emboldened regime troops to advance and cut off vital supply lines. On the other, support for rebel groups dried up in the run-up to the conference known as Geneva III, largely as a result of US pressure on Turkey and the Gulf States. Squeezed from all sides, the opposition found itself with its back to the wall. Initially, an increase in Russian carpet bombing on and around Aleppo threatened to scuttle the talks before they even began. The deadlock was broken by an agreement between Moscow and Washington for a

“cessation of hostilities” in Syria that excluded groups recognized as terrorist by the UN Security Council – at this point, Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front). Two weeks later, Moscow announced that it would largely pull out from Syria, while intensifying its diplomatic efforts. So far, evaluations of whether the Russian drawdown will indeed be substantial appear premature. However, there are indications that Russia and Assad may no longer be entirely on the same page. Observers have taken note that the Russian announcement occurred before a background of intransigence was displayed by the Syrian regime, and exactly two days after Damascus had

dismissed the idea of holding early presidential elections – a main plank of the Geneva talks. Russia, the United States, and other members of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) agreed in Vienna in November 2015 on a UN-supervised ballot within 18 months as part of a framework for a political transition. A UN Security Council resolution in December 2015 further endorsed the Vienna framework. ISSG members, including Germany, are also part of a task force set up to monitor the ceasefire. Although the ISSG is dominated by the United States and Russia, the two countries are obliged to share information with the remaining members, potentially giving them more say. The ceasefire task force is also charged with delineating areas where terrorist organizations operate, and which are hence considered legitimate targets. Since Jabhat al-Nusra, unlike Islamic State, has often operated near and sometimes in cooperation with Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades and other rebel groups, these decisions are liable to be contentious.

The Russian-Alawite Link

Russia might be prepared to pressure the Damascus regime into concessions – and perhaps even sacrifice Assad himself at a later stage – to present itself as an actor capable of delivering solutions. Yet, Moscow has shown no signs of lessening its backing for Alawite officials, as well as the top Alawite military and security tiers, whose disproportional presence in the state and security structure was a major factor in the tensions that fueled the 2011 uprising. The Vienna declaration emphasized the preservation of state institutions, which could serve as a justification to retain much of the Alawite-dominated military and security apparatus that has underpinned the power structure for the past five decades. The links between these groups and Russia have deep roots. Since the times of the USSR, Moscow's relationship with Syria had centered on the Alawite ruling elite and officer class, many of whom had received training

in Russia. After Assad succeeded his father in 2000, Russia also became more involved in Syria's small but substantial oil and gas sector, where they often partnered with relatives of Assad. As war raged in the interior and the oil fields were lost to Islamic State or Kurdish militias, the authorities awarded a Russian company the rights for offshore gas exploration in the coastal waters around Latakia in 2013, although no actual exploration has taken place thus far. Even if Moscow were indeed to pull most of its troops out of Syria, it would retain the new airbase near the Alawite mountains – the nerve center of the intervention. Russia has thus secured a strategic foothold in the eastern Mediterranean, but it relies on continued close relations with the current power holders in Damascus.

Reversal of the Military Picture

Russia's entry into the war occurred at a point when the Assad regime was clearly on the ropes. After the inauguration in January 2015 of the new Saudi king, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, joint mediation by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey facilitated a new rebel coalition by the name of Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), which was mainly comprised of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafist group with a history of tense – and often violent – relationships with Jabhat al-Nusra. Western-backed FSA brigades, while not forming a part of Jaish al-Fatah, contributed to significant advances by the new alliance by deploying anti-tank missiles, which helped to disrupt the supply lines of loyalist troops. By fall 2015, the offensive threatened to cut off Assad's seat of power in Damascus from his home region on the coast, where the bulk of what has remained of the regime's army and militia reservoir are recruited.

Russian firepower altered this military landscape dramatically. By the time the ceasefire came into effect, Assad and his foreign militia allies were coming close to sealing off rebel areas in the north and interior. Aside from airpower, Moscow

deployed multiple rocket launchers manned by Russian personnel with more obliteration capacity than the ones used by Assad's army. Still, rebels offered stiff resistance and held key supply junctions in northern and central Syria, without which they would have been completely cut off. Even after the ceasefire, fighting has persisted along such strategic fronts. Russia appears to have provided Assad's military with stronger armor and more advanced equipment since 2015. However, since Russia is reluctant to put a large number of soldiers on the ground, the regime would still need more involvement from its Shiite allies, which it cannot necessarily take for granted. Iran's priority appears to have been securing Shiite areas and Shiite shrines in Syria, as well as territories along the border with Lebanon, thus guarding Hezbollah's back and the supply corridors between the two countries. In contrast, the regime has struggled to hold territory on its own. Deeper Iranian involvement may be in the offing if rebels recover and go back on the attack.

Still, Russian bombardment dislodged the rebels from most of the high ground around Latakia by early 2016. Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane over the region in November 2015 prompted an escalation of the airstrikes, which forced most rebels to retreat to Idlib. Under Russian cover, regime forces and Hezbollah chipped away at northern supply junctures to opposition areas, squeezing rebels between the regime and Islamic State in the governorate of Aleppo, and in Hama and Homs further south. In private, rebel leaders criticized Turkey for what they described as provoking more Russian air attacks without increasing or upgrading their weapons supplies. By mid-February 2016, the raids had killed many rebel commanders among an estimated 2,000 anti-Assad combatants, as well as 1,400 civilians. A commander of the "Free Men of the Middle Mountain Brigade," nominally part of Ahrar al-Sham, reported dozens of airstrikes in a single day on the town of Salma above Latakia, subsequently re-

captured by the regime. Surviving members of the brigade largely withdrew to their home region near Jisr al-Shughour in the Idlib province, which is also defended by Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and Turkic fighters from central Asia.

The regime's consolidation of the environments of Latakia placed it in a commanding position to attack Idlib and cut off vital road intersections leading south. But subsequent territorial gains in the interior have been limited, with rebels preserving main frontlines in Hama and Homs. In the two regions, the rebels appear more solidly implanted than in the north, partly because their commanders are reared in the local communities, and the groups do not prey upon the local population as much as further north.

Aleppo Strangled

Idlib has become the last remaining rebel inlet in the north after the road connecting Aleppo to the Turkish border near the town of Azaz was severed. In February 2016, parts of the Azaz corridor were taken by loyalist forces. Other stretches are under the control of the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is in turn affiliated with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Operating out of Afrin to the northwest of Aleppo, the YPG militias have a tense relationship with the rebels of the region. The city itself, which was Syria's commercial and industrial hub before the war, has been broadly divided between a regime-controlled western and a rebel-held eastern sector since 2012. With the Azaz corridor cut off, Assad's forces closed in on Castello Road, Aleppo's last land outlet not with the regime. YPG militia from the Kurdish neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsoud also attacked the road, in effect helping the regime to lay a near siege on Aleppo. Yet, in a rare attack in March 2016, fighters of Islamic State captured a road connecting the government-held sectors of Aleppo to the south, indirectly relieving pressure on

the rebels in the city. Jund al-Aqsa – a Salafist brigade nominally part of Jaish al-Fatah – apparently participated in the attack, raising the specter of major defections to Islamic State should the rebels decide that their supposed Sunni allies have abandoned them, whether it be Turkey, the Gulf States, or Jordan. Islamic State itself has thus far been only a secondary target for the Russian attacks, despite the fact that their extremism has served as a major argument to justify the Russian intervention. One major exception has been the ancient city of Palmyra, where massive Russian bombardment prepared the ground for the capture of the city by Assad’s forces and associated militia, in the first defeat inflicted on Islamic State with Russian assistance.

Ramifications in the South

In another blow to the opposition, Moscow’s intervention forced a near shutdown of the only other route available to the rebels: through the southern border with Jordan. The Jordanian establishment did not welcome what it perceived as the increasingly Islamist character of the Syrian revolt and feared a Muslim Brotherhood ascendancy next door. Thus, the Kingdom mostly acted as a conduit for US and Saudi support to moderate rebels in the south and the suburbs of Damascus. As a result, jihadist groups failed to develop much traction in southern Syria, prompting for instance Jabhat al-Nusra to transfer a significant part of its fighters to the north. However, by the second half of 2015, Riyadh had shifted priorities to reverse the setbacks it had suffered in its intervention in Yemen. The United States, for its part, refocused efforts on creating proxies that would be willing to fight Islamic State without seeking the downfall of Assad.

After the Russian campaign started in September 2015, Jordan chose to accommodate Russia and accepted to set up what Moscow described as a “special working mechanism” with the Jordanian military. What exactly this cooperation entails re-

mains unclear, although there are allegations that intelligence-sharing has helped Russia identify targets for its attacks. Support to the FSA brigades was largely cut off, forcing the rebels to withdraw from the strategically important Sheikh Miskeen military base, which was seized by Assad’s army and Hezbollah militia after heavy Russian bombing in January 2016. The Russian airstrikes on Sheikh Miskeen and other targets in the south coincided with increasing numbers of assassinations in Deraa, which killed about two dozen FSA commanders.

New US Proxies

The rise of Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra contributed to growing American wariness that Syria could turn into another jihadist haven if Assad were to be deposed. As jihadist groups rampaged in Libya and Yemen, Washington objected little to the Russian offensive; instead, it worked with Moscow to convene the Geneva talks. Militarily, Washington strengthened the Kurdish YPG militia, which number in the thousands, and set up smaller Arab auxiliary forces, many of which were trained by US personnel in Jordan. These Arab forces mostly hail from tribes in the east of Syria and, although nominally independent, often cooperate closely with the YPG. One such force, called the New Syrian Army, made its operational debut in March 2016 when it launched – under the cover of US airstrikes – a failed attack on Tanaf, a Syrian border-crossing with Iraq that is also close to the Jordanian border. Tanaf had been controlled by Islamic State since the group overran eastern Syria in 2013 and killed those who refused to pledge allegiance. The Shueitat tribe of Deir al-Zor sustained many of these casualties, and now forms a main component of the Syrian New Army, alongside tribes from the Homs and Raqqa regions, whose lot also worsened under Islamic State.

By shoring up Arab clients, Washington can hope to prevent the jihadists from exploiting misgivings over perceived Kurdish expansionism and razing of Arab villages,

which Amnesty International said amounts to war crimes.

Backing disgruntled tribes and Arab militia also allows Washington to bypass the FSA, which Washington rarely trusted, as well as other rebels who insist that the fight against Islamic State and Assad had to go in tandem, since his continued presence would only cause more extremism. Yet, their argument mostly fell on deaf ears. The US approach has also angered Turkey. Ankara has attempted to curb the expansion of the YPG along the border and challenged Russia's unfettered hand in Syria without receiving much support from its fellow NATO members. Wary of a deepening split with Ankara, in March 2016 Washington opposed a unilateral PYD declaration of a "federal" region in northern Syria, without however being able to placate Turkish concerns. It was US airstrikes that helped the YPG to grab vast amounts of territory along the Turkish border.

Emboldened YPG

Turkish concerns about the Kurdish ascendancy only deepened with the Russian intervention. Already backed by the United States, the Kurdish militia now have the option to also work with Russia, expand its land grab in northern Syria, and play Washington and Moscow against each other as it bids for support from both. Determined to advance to the Turkish border, the YPG attacked US-backed FSA units with the support of Russian airstrikes. The attack made the United States appear not in control of its YPG proxy, which Washington had touted as its most trusted ally in Syria in the fight against Islamic State. But rebels managed to hold on to Azaz, which is 10 km across the border. The town and the countryside to the east controlled by Islamic State are the only remaining obstacles between the Afrin enclave and the Kurdish-controlled cantons of Kobane and Qamishli in the east. Linking these areas would create a geographically contiguous area under Kurdish control along most of the Syrian-Turkish border –

thus giving a significant boost to claims for Kurdish autonomy – and is hence a strategic goal for the YPG/PYD. For the same reason, it is also the ultimate strategic nightmare of Turkey, which finds itself in a renewed confrontation with the PKK.

Responding to what it regards as PKK provocation in Syria, Turkey transported hundreds of Ahrar al-Sham and other fighters from Idlib through its territory to Aleppo to help defend Azaz against the YPG. Ankara also shelled newly captured areas and other targets related to the YPG, drawing US criticism but achieving little effect. Turkey had originally tried to preempt a YPG advance by proposing to turn most of the strip separating Afrin from the northeast into a safe zone that shields civilians from Assad and Islamic State. But the idea quickly ran into opposition from the United States, and even a drastic reduction in size – from an area 100 km wide and 25 km deep to the town of Azaz and its surroundings – failed to get it off the ground.

Turkey Bets on Losing Horses

The YPG's territorial gains exposed Ankara's failure to build an effective ally in Syria, despite early ties to the rebels. The north was home to the first defectors from Assad's military who crossed into Turkey looking for safety and support. When the protest movement started and Ankara's entreaties for genuine democratic reforms failed to convince Assad, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan declared himself de facto protector of Syria's Sunni majority, yet avoided direct Turkish involvement. Turkey appears to have expected Assad not to last, and to see him replaced by a friendly regime led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Such a scenario would have placed Ankara in a prime position to reap economic and political benefits from a post-Arab Spring Middle East molded by Turkey and hinged on Syria.

Prior to the revolt, Syria became a vital transport link and a nascent commercial springboard from Turkey to the Levant and the Arab Peninsula, as Ankara cancelled visa

requirements and struck trade deals that helped boost Turkish exports to the region.

Expecting an Islamist ascendancy after Assad, Ankara supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in its power struggles within the mainstream political opposition, which had organized itself formally in Istanbul in late 2011. But the Brotherhood's control evaporated after Saudi Arabia elbowed its own allies into the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces in 2013.

Militarily, Ankara has thrown its support mainly behind Ahrar al-Sham. Despite battlefield gains before the Russian campaign, Ahrar al-Sham ended up deeply undermined by internal contradictions. Many of the fighters also loathed the heavy-handed tutelage by Turkish intelligence, not least in operational matters and frequent changes in the levels of supply and financial support. Similar to smaller rebel groups with links to Ankara, Ahrar al-Sham was also undermined by inconsistencies in Turkish support due to what many in the group and the wider opposition regard as differences over Syria between Turkey's intelligence services and its military.

Still, Turkey helped to control the chronic differences within Ahrar al-Sham. Despite its Salafist foundations, many less-ideological members still saw the organization as part of a popular revolt to replace Assad's rule with a pluralist system and resisted the domination of the jihadist wing. Such ideological divisions resurfaced, however, after Ankara helped nudge Ahrar al-Sham to participate in an opposition meeting in Riyadh in December 2015, where a unified political platform ahead of the Geneva talks was agreed upon. The organization also suffers from internal tensions over alleged enrichment and privileges. For instance, complaints have been rife against the commander of Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib, Abu Khuzaima, who built a business from smuggling and extortion at the Bab al-Hawa border-crossing. Attempts by senior ranks in Ahrar al-Sham to remove Khuzaima failed, as the self-styled "Emir of the Border" has amassed a private army and a fleet of car-mounted machine guns.

Such differences have caused increasing numbers of defections to Jabhat al-Nusra, which is more self-reliant financially and perceived as ideologically coherent. Despite the cooperation of the two groups in the Jaish al-Fatah alliance, violence and turf warfare persisted between them. By late 2015 Jaish al-Fatah practically ceased to exist, and in March 2016 Jabhat al-Nusra took advantage of the ceasefire – from which it is explicitly excluded – to overrun a Western-backed FSA brigade based in the town of Ma'arrat al-Nu'maan, near Idlib. Yet they encountered an apparent popular backlash there, as the relative calm encouraged protests against Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib and elsewhere, as well as demonstrations echoing the peaceful demands for the downfall of the Assad regime at the beginning of the revolt. Across rebel Syria, the demonstrators appeared to be rejecting the jihadist takeovers as well as Assad.

Conclusions and Recommendations

By March 2016, six months of Russian bombing had turned rebel formations into isolated pieces on a chessboard, besieged and without scope to fortify one another. Internal strife and turf wars reinforce this fragmentation. The cessation of hostilities, which forbids the capture of new territory, has given rebels some breathing room. But they are still under enormous pressure. Riyadh, their main Arab backer, remains bogged down in Yemen, which it regards as more vital to its security, and is looking for a way out. Having pushed the opposition to go to Geneva, Saudi Arabia may well go along with a deal that eventually removes Assad without fundamental changes to the system, allowing Riyadh to clinch a symbolic victory of taking out a main Iranian ally. In reality, Tehran has been making de facto territorial annexations in areas it regards as strategic, relying on Hezbollah and Iraqi militia as well as Syrian Shiite auxiliaries trained and equipped by Tehran. Moscow, which appears keen to reclaim some of the international clout it enjoyed

in the pre-1990 bi-polar world order, may eventually engineer an exit for Assad, thus underlining that it can deliver solutions. But Russia has shown little interest in a political settlement that goes beyond scratching the surface of the current regime, let alone establishing accountability for violence and war crimes, or a genuinely representative political order. More in tune with the Russian approach would be to trade democratic demands against a token expansion of the Sunni facade of the regime by co-opting a number of opposition figures.

The regime, for its part, has shown no interest in a transition. It appears to regard the cessation of hostilities as a piecemeal prelude to rebel capitulation along the lines of the “National Reconciliations” that occurred in besieged areas between 2013 and 2015. Rebel surrenders in all but name, these agreements were often followed by new arrests and forced recruitment into Assad’s army.

As long as the Alawite security core, which is largely invisible, stays intact, Moscow’s interests – along with the authoritarian political order in Syria – will be preserved. Under this scenario, meaningful opposition will remain confined to activists in exile, which is likely to become permanent for the thousands of dissidents and peaceful activists who fled torture and death. Germany and some EU countries, as well as the United States, appear currently to be interested in achieving a lasting solution to the conflict according to the international framework, which calls for an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers and the continuity of a functioning government. German politicians should resist tendencies to take democratic window dressing at face value that is motivated by the urge to end the refugee crisis and what they see as the militant threat from Syria in the wake of the Brussels attacks, and instead insist on a thorough reform of the security sector.

As long as the security apparatus and government militias operate beyond any control and accountability – and opponents are imprisoned, tortured, and killed – the

return of a sizeable number of the mostly Sunni refugees is not likely, nor would it be safe or humane to send them back.

Procedurally, UN envoy Staffan de Mistura had envisaged the Geneva process to establish four tracks, including one concerning the “military, security and counter-terrorism.” But with the international focus on curbing jihadists in Syria, there might be a tendency to sweep the arbitrary powers and entrenched sectarianism of the security sector and the flaws in the judicial system under the rug.

The more immediate issue is to uphold the ceasefire. One way to convert the cessation of hostilities into a durable arrangement would be for Germany and other members of the ceasefire taskforce to formalize the deal and establish a transparent monitoring and sanctioning mechanism. This would make it more difficult to change the status quo through violence and also make Russia and the United States more accountable.

Meanwhile, the ceasefire remains fragile. For example, Turkey, which has been alarmed by the Kurdish advance, could substantially increase flows to the rebels, encouraging them to strike back. Robbed of intensive Russian air support, Assad may try to play Iran off against Russia and renew the push – with backing from Shiite militia – to cut off the remaining outlets that link opposition areas in the interior to Turkey.

If the rebels give up, as the regime hopes, they may join the refugee trek to Europe, or try to blend back into civilian life, with some continuing clandestine or terrorist insurgent activities. So far, rebel weakness wreaked by the Russian strikes appears to have benefited mainly Jabhat al-Nusra and, to a lesser degree, Islamic State. Renewed conflict looms, together with further radicalization of Syrian Sunnis, if Alawite control of the police state and the latter’s domination over society continues.

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