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Syria: Too Fragile to Ignore

Military Outcomes, External Influence and European Options

Volker Perthes

For the last eight years, almost all geopolitical, ideological, and sectarian conflicts of the Middle East have converged in Syria. Syria is not at peace today, but the government of Bashar al-Assad – with more than a little help from Russia and Iran – has won the war against the armed anti-regime opposition. The political opposition is largely marginalized. The Arab states are about to normalize their relations with the government in Damascus. Russia and Iran are the main external power brokers. The US military withdrawal from Syria will also reduce its political influence. The European Union and its member states will have to come up with a policy of their own to deal with the new reality in Syria. For Europe, Syria is too close – and too fragile – to ignore.

Diplomats love to reiterate that there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria. Although this is true, there have been undeniable military outcomes, most notably the defeat of the main opposition and rebel groups. The Islamic State (also referred to as ISIS or Daesh) has also lost almost all the territory it had controlled in the country, but it remains a veritable terrorist force. Some areas are still outside government control: The so-called Idlib de-escalation zone in the north has survived thanks to a Turkish-Russian arrangement but is likely to return to the government sooner or later, probably gradually rather than as a result of a major offensive. This is particularly so since Turkish-backed rebels have been defeated and most of the area has been conquered by "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" (HTS) — a rebel alliance led by the former Nusra Front, a Syrian offshoot of al-Qaeda that is seen internationally as being fair game in the fight against terrorism. Turkey has no strategic interest in helping this group to control the area. Ankara seems intent, though, to maintain its hold and that of its own Syrian allies over a strip of territory between the Turkish province of Hatay and the Euphrates River.

The territory east of the Euphrates is still — as of the time of writing — controlled by the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant force within the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces. Without the support of US troops, however, the PYD will not be able to maintain its semi-autonomy in this area. For the PYD, it does not matter much whether the US drawdown comes quickly or happen slowly. They have learned that the US presence is finite, whereas the Syrian state and Turkey are not going away.

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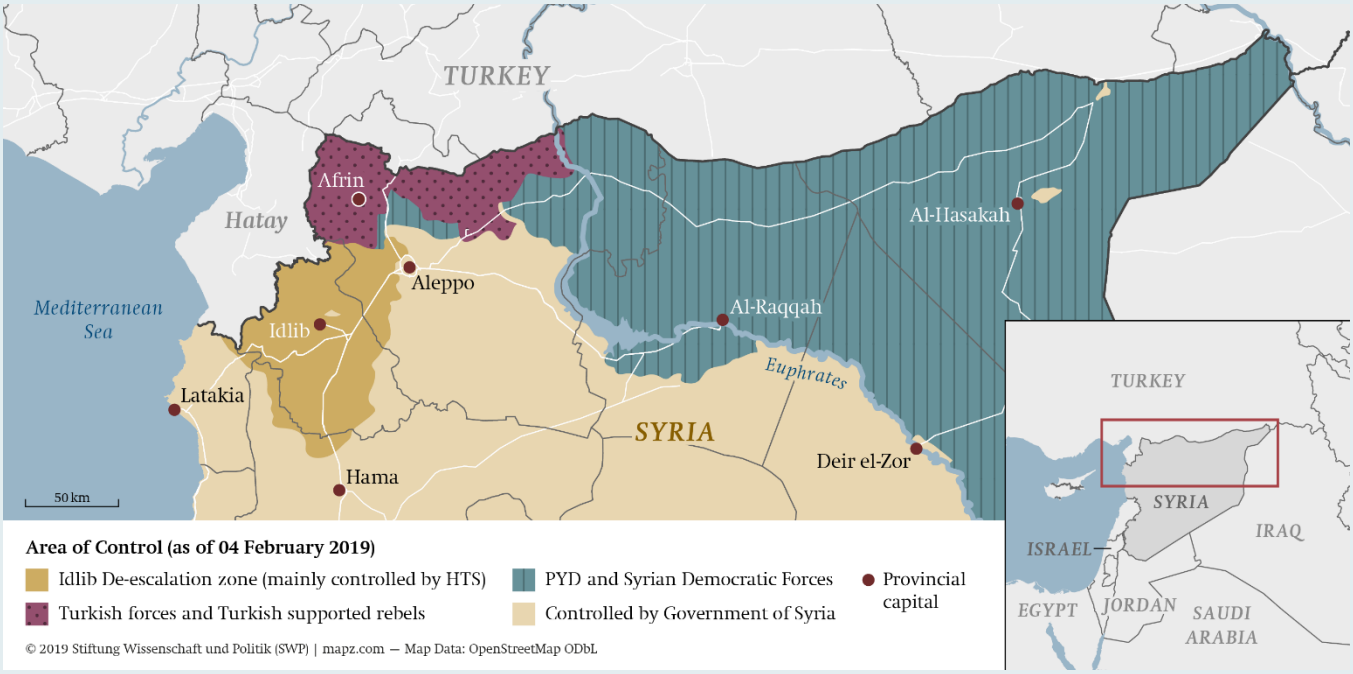

Given the choice of facing a Turkish invasion or seeking an arrangement with the government in Damascus, the Kurdish group will certainly opt for the latter by trying to secure some form of meaningful decentralization and an integration of its own militia into the state's armed forces. Most likely, therefore, Damascus will re-establish control over the cities and oil fields in the east and over the Syrian-Iraqi border within the next couple of months. Discussions between the United States, Turkey, and others about a "security zone" along the eastern part of the Turkish-Syrian border have, so far, not produced any tangible outcomes. Russia has a strong interest in seeing Syrian state authority return to this area, and Turkey needs Russia's consent if it wants to maintain its hold over Syrian territory west of the Euphrates. We can therefore assume that direct Turkish control in the region east of the river will be restricted, at most, to a narrow strip of land. Most likely, Syrian government troops will move close to the border, and there will be some presence by Russian troops to provide against unintended incidents.

Post-war Realities

The future of Syria will no longer be decided on the battlefield, nor in UN-led political negotiations in Geneva. The new UN Special Envoy for Syria may be able to form a Constitutional Committee with representatives from the government and the political opposition as well as legal experts and societal leaders who are uncontroversial enough for Turkey, Russia, and Iran to agree upon. It is very unlikely, however, that the Assad government would allow the adoption of any constitutional text that could seriously limit the powers of the president and the security apparatus.

The post-war reality of Syria will nonetheless only partly resemble Syria before the war. Absent unforeseen events, Assad will remain in power even after the next presidential elections, now logged for 2021. He will be ruling a devastated country, however: Syria's economy is down to roughly 50 percent of its pre-war performance. More than a quarter of the Syrian population have become refugees abroad; another quarter or so have been internally displaced. Syria's social fabric has been severely disrupted, as many of the better educated have been driven into exile, and war profiteers have been able to acquire property and positions. The government is not eager to have the bulk of the refugee population come home. Parts of the former rebel-held areas find themselves under de facto occupation by the security apparatus, with no guarantees for returnees or for those who have stayed during and after rebel rule. It is rather unlikely that local or external actors will be held accountable for war crimes and the up to 500,000 Syrian war deaths.

Russia and Iran

Given its dependence on Russia and Iran, the Syrian government has also de facto lost much of its sovereignty. Moscow has become the most — and Iran the second most — important powerbroker in Syria. Both will likely maintain a military presence and military bases as well as a strong level of influence inside the political and security apparatus. Although they have been able to manage their differences quite successfully, their strategies for post-war Syria are not congruent: Iran sees Syria as a forward base for what Iranian strategists call their deterrence posture against Israel. To consolidate its influence, Iran seems intent to ingrain itself more deeply into the military-political-ideological and economic fabric of Syria. Russia, in contrast, is neither interested in such a form of Iranian hegemony in Syria, nor in further regional escalation. Moscow aims at reconstituting a stable, closely allied, and internationally accepted government in Damascus. For that purpose, Russia is pursuing an ambitious agenda that includes ongoing military stabilization efforts, the constitutional process, military reform, local reconciliations, the return of refugees, economic reconstruction, and the prevention of a major Israeli-Iranian military confrontation in Syria. This is more than Russia can shoulder itself, and it is more than it can do with its own predominantly military means. Moscow has therefore been asking for support from Europe and the rest of the world, particularly to finance the country's reconstruction.

European Choices

The impending military withdrawal of the United States from Syria will also reduce Washington's diplomatic influence over Syria-related developments. This increases the need for Europe to develop a common policy on how to deal with Syrian realities. Even before the US made the decision to leave, it was the right thing for Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Emmanuel Macron to meet and discuss Syria with the presidents of Russia and Turkey, thereby making an effort to at least avoid further international polarization over Syria. It remains to be seen whether such a format can lead to a modicum of international coordination. It is certainly important to make the attempt. The EU states and Russia do not share the same interests in Syria: Whether to support the stabilization of authoritarianism or instead seek some form of transformation toward better, more inclusive governance at least, is not only an ideological question. It denotes both different attitudes with regard to stability, human security, and change, as well as different time perspectives — more short-term or more long-term ones. But much of what Russia is trying to achieve in Syria today, after its victory, is not incompatible with European interests — certainly if compared with the Iranian agenda.

The EU and its members may not like the military outcome, but they recognize it. They are no longer demanding a transitional government or a power-sharing arrangement in Damascus. They are right to support the efforts of the UN and UN aid agencies. This cannot replace a European strategy for Syria, however, which after all is a fragile state in Europe's neighborhood. Essentially, Europe will have to decide whether to leave international responsibility for Syria to the Astana group — Russia, Iran, and Turkey — or to engage.

There are no ideal options with regard to reconstruction — but reconstruction is the one significant lever Europe has. The EU, along with international financial institutions and wealthy Arab states, cannot simply provide the financial means for a Russian, Iranian, and Syrian-government led reconstruction effort. Europe does not want to support a repressive regime that, after all, is responsible for the vast majority of the war dead and most of the destruction. Nor should it help to further enrich war profiteers and regime cronies who have already come up with grandiose plans to "develop" and change the demography of devastated former rebel-held neighborhoods.

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At the same time, Europe needs to realize that the Syrian people, particularly in war-damaged towns and suburbs, are in dire need of support. These populations have been harmed in multiple ways, not only through physical destruction. Many of their youth are in exile, imprisoned, or dead. They have mostly lost the support of Western and Arab donors who had supported social infrastructure and services in these areas as long as they were under opposition control. The government does not prioritize support for these people but treats them as defeated enemies. A lack of reconstruction would not only leave former opposition-held areas in unacceptable humanitarian conditions but indeed create the breeding ground for a resurrected IS or "IS 2.0."

Rights, Protection, Access: A Focused Approach toward Reconstruction

Europe should communicate to Russia, and thus to the Syrian government, that it is prepared to contribute toward the reconstruction in Syria in a conditioned approach based on three elements: rights, protection, and access. Or, more concretely, based on a modicum of rule of law and civil rights, including the rights of returnees and refugees to their property and freedom; protection of the most vulnerable, such as displaced persons, children, detainees, or those who have been vanquished in the war; as well as access for international organizations, NGOs, and diplomats to the people and areas in need. The more progress there is with regard to these elements, the more support that could be made available. Support would principally go to the most needy areas in Syria: the towns and neighborhoods most seriously damaged, such as Aleppo, Homs, and the Damascus suburbs, but also Raqqa, which has been left heavily destroyed after the US-led campaign to oust the IS from the city.

Support should not be channeled through government ministries but through international NGOs and UN agencies, which, in turn, will work with municipalities and local NGOs, employ local people, and thereby also be able to monitor progress and make sure that disbursements actually reach people and places in need. This will lead to a slower disbursement of funds and to more small-scale projects — including low-income housing, schools, and medical infrastructure — than a process led by the government or by private developers who enjoy presidential or government patronage. But it is likely to be more effective. Neither the Syrian government nor Iran will welcome such an approach. Russia, however, which actually is demanding European reconstruction support for Syria, would understand, and probably even appreciate it.

Does this mean ignoring the Syrian government? No. As the regime seems to be there to stay, European states need official and unofficial channels of communication with it. Diplomatic relations are not a reward for good behavior. Most EU states and the EU itself have not cut diplomatic ties but rather reduced or withdrawn their personnel. They should now find a common line on how to reestablish political contacts with Damascus, but avoid a rush toward full normalization as long as no serious domestic reconciliation and no implementation of the core elements outlined above are in sight. A diplomatic presence, however, even at lower levels, can improve access, allow for a realistic assessment of the situation and may, at times, help to solve humanitarian or other problems. And it would demonstrate to the people in Syria that the international community is not indifferent to what happens in their country.

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