

# Syria 2017: Taking Stock of a Multifaceted War

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In the long and complex war that is sweeping Syria, 2017 was the year of the military victory over ISIS and the emergence of the Kurdish question. However, as in previous years, this did not bring the conflict any closer to a solution. What began in 2011 as a popular uprising against the despotism of the regime swiftly became a bloody war in which, first, other regional states and, later, international ones became involved. The devastating humanitarian crisis has already left around half a million dead, more than five million refugees and several million internally displaced persons. The irruption of ISIS in the Syrian war, expanding territorially from its birthplace in Iraq, triggered a military response that seems to have set off a sort of regional and international integration, placing Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Russia and Western governments, as well as non-state actors such as the Kurds and Hezbollah, on the same side. However, that common objective intrinsically lacked any joint vision to unite all the players. On the contrary, they were split by deep divisions and conflicting interests. Beyond the consensus that ISIS was a threat, they differed, ideologically and geopolitically, on what kind of regional stability should prevail and which players to support on the ground.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the military victory over ISIS, grandly proclaimed by Putin in December 2017, was neither a window of opportunity to settle the Syrian conflict nor a definitive political victory over the radical movement. Moreover, it has further intensified the conflict in the northeast of the country, where the confrontation between the Kurds and Tur-

key has added another facet to the conflict, whilst also helping to create another territorial enclave in the already highly fragmented Syria.

## The Kurdish Sub-conflict

Initially, Turkey refrained from becoming directly involved in the war, and it opposed the direct participation of Russia in Syrian territory when Moscow launched its military intervention in September 2015 (officially to fight ISIS, but in fact to save Bashar al-Assad's regime and finish with its opponents). Several factors prompted Erdogan's government to change that position. The vulnerability felt as a result of the attempted coup in July 2016, belatedly and half-heartedly denounced by its Western allies, increasingly fraught relations with Europe, and the troubling evolution of Kurdish territorial power on the Syrian border with Turkey combined to convince Ankara to strengthen its cooperation with other governments, such as those of Iran and Russia, and, thus, to embrace the policy of resolving tensions with Moscow. The US initiative, seconded by the European countries, of delegating the fight against ISIS to the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) – the Syrian branch of the Turkish PKK – supplying them with training, weapons and funding, had the effect of strengthening the PKK. Although some Arab groups fight in the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), they are nevertheless entirely dominated by the KDP. As the KDP-SDF drove ISIS out of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, they gained control of the north-eastern region of Syria, bordering with Turkey, implementing their own plans for Kurdish self-government and bolstering their patron, the Turkish PKK. As a result, Turkey

<sup>1</sup> KRIEG, Andreas. "ISIS, and the façade of negative cooperation." Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. *Research Paper*, October 2014.

began to view this gradual increase in Kurdish power on its border with Syria as a threat and launched a direct military intervention in northeast Syria. Despite the ties cultivated by Russia with the Kurdish parties, Moscow, seeking to reconcile with Ankara, a strategically important move for the Kremlin, approved the Turkish offensive. Meanwhile, the US found itself in an uncomfortable and complicated situation, caught between its declared support for the Kurds and its relations with its NATO partner. However, the US needs an ally in Syria, and the only candidate it has is the Kurds.

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The powerful alliance between Turkey, Iran and Russia was on display at the trilateral summit held on 22 November 2017 in Sochi between Putin, Erdogan and Rouhani to push for an end to the conflict in Syria following the victory over ISIS. It took place just days before the start of a new round of UN-backed talks between representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition on 28 November. Both initiatives proved unsuccessful. In the meantime, this Kurdish sub-conflict, grafted onto the already multifaceted space of the war in Syria, has provoked its own tensions, which began to surface in 2017. First, there is the internal Kurdish tension between the Turkish PKK and its Syrian branch, the KDP. The increasing power acquired by the latter as it took over parts of northeast Syria previously occupied by ISIS was fuelling desire amongst its leadership for a local Kurdish ethnic project, to advocate self-government in Syria, something it has already imposed *de facto*. In contrast, the historical vision of its patron, the

PKK, which has always opposed the creation of an Iraqi Kurdistan, is to build a non-ethnic global state that should begin with the Turkish part, which is both home to the largest segment of the Kurdish population and its historical birthplace.<sup>2</sup>

Another issue arising from this situation, which will play an important role in the future stability of northeast Syria, is the peaceful coexistence between Kurds and Arabs. Many Arabs from these regions, including those who have swelled the ranks of refugees and hope to return, believe that the Kurds are determined to take advantage of this situation and of US support to establish a "Syrian Kurdistan." They fear the type of ethnic cleaning that certain episodes occurring during the recovery of the territory occupied by ISIS already gave the impression of in 2017.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, on 20 January 2018, Turkey initiated a military offensive in Afrin, controlled by the Kurds, which, by mid-March was under Turkish control, with the support of factions of the Free Syrian Army. However, although the Turkish victory over Afrin had considerable symbolic value insofar as it conveyed Ankara's firm commitment even to use military means to deal with the Kurdish issue on its border with Syria, it was a relatively easy choice, given that Afrin is separated from the main Kurd-dominated territory east of the Euphrates (between Manbij and the Iraqi border) under direct US protection. In fact, it was little more than the announcement of the start of a new sub-war within an overall Syrian war that, in itself, has already generated a great implosion and territorial division: areas under the control of al-Assad's army, others controlled by the anti-Assad opposition (which, in turn, is fragmented and supported by diverging regional players, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia), and others dominated by the pro-Turkish, pro-Iranian or Kurdish militias. How to resolve the distribution of power between all these players with a view to a prospective solution? How will the al-Assad regime, definitively saved by Russia but which seeks to restore its hegemonic power throughout Syria, deal with this distribution of power in light of the changes being imposed by the war?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP (ICG). "The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria," *Middle East Report n° 176*, May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> KHADDOUR, Kheder. "Back to what future? What remains for Syria's displaced people." Carnegie Middle East Center, *Paper*, January 2018, pp. 13-16.

<sup>4</sup> In June 2017, a regime official responded to a question on the prospects for reconciliation as follows: "We will reconcile with the land, not the people." This statement shows that the al-Assad regime's priority is to recover the territory, not the citizens who live there, for whom it has always shown a despicable lack of empathy. Interview by KHADDOUR, *op. cit.* p. 8.

## Russian Leadership and the US Withdrawal

The Russian bid in Syria has undoubtedly yielded considerable gains for Putin, whilst the US has shown scant leadership and lost influence in the region. The Kremlin's main geopolitical victory in the Syrian theatre was achieved at the international level, reinserting Russia into the game of the great powers. Furthermore, the great diplomatic activity deployed by the Kremlin has positioned it at the centre of the communication with each of the parties involved in the conflict, whether Iran or Saudi Arabia, Israel or Hezbollah. Likewise, it was Russia that spoke with Erdogan to discuss the offensive against the US-backed Kurdish militias in northern Syria and that spoke to Netanyahu to contain the military escalation of the US's great ally after it bombed Syrian targets in response to the incursion of an Iranian drone. In short, Putin has emerged as a very powerful interlocutor in the region.

Another strategic change that Russia has achieved in the Syrian conflict has been to weaken US interests by eliminating the goal of regime change, the great American desideratum in Syria. Al-Assad's political removal was considered a *sine qua non* in the US position from the start of the war and for any solution to the conflict. This once indispensable requirement has today disappeared from the agendas and political discourses.

The irruption of ISIS in the Syrian war has changed this parameter. It has meant obviating the pro-democracy causes radically advocated by Arab societies, including Syria's, in the revolutions of 2010-2011, with the consequent return to the drift towards despotism, the chaotic interventionism of regional and international players in the conflicts, and the misinterpretation of the conflict surrounding Sunni/Shiite sectarianism. Far from a humanitarian, social and political response to these key issues, only the military strategy has been imposed.

In this amalgam of players and interests, the battle against ISIS failed to pay the necessary attention to attacking the political causes that fuel it. The region's totalitarian powers, including al-Assad, have

recovered their strategic value, and no heed is paid to the consequences of the social frustration they generate and the increasing radicalization that they provoke. Furthermore, seeking to delegitimize the opposition that has fought against it since the start of the revolution in 2011, which it has always labelled 'terrorist,' the Syrian regime will encourage radical outgrowths, such as ISIS, so that all means will be placed at its disposal to fight terrorism, ignoring or downplaying its own exercise of terror.

Once ISIS became entrenched in Syrian territory, Washington shifted its focus to defeating ISIS, forgetting regime change. This has been a victory for the regime in Damascus that the US has been unable to confront, because it has also been unable to define its objectives in the Middle East once ISIS has been defeated, at least for the time being. Will it maintain its military presence in Syria and intervene in other emerging scenarios? Will it continue to support 'Syrian Kurdistan?' And, if so, how will it manage its important relations with Turkey? After the parenthesis of the intervention against ISIS, nothing suggests that the Trump administration will change that ambiguous and ill-defined position. Even less so, when its stated priority is 'America first' and given the low profile maintained, for example, in the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Everything seems to indicate that US leadership sees few reasons to increase the country's involvement in the Middle East, except for the occasional reaction without any sort of long-term strategy.

One might thus be tempted to ask whether any peace ultimately achieved in Syria will be a 'pax Russica.' Moscow will no doubt wish to impose it, although it will first seek to ensure that the rebel strongholds are thoroughly destroyed, as is occurring in the case of the Guta region, which has been subjected to a relentless siege and bombardment since February 2018. Likewise, it is not clear how the enormous challenge entailed by a Russian military withdrawal from the conflict can be handled without leaving al-Assad vulnerable. However, it is also true that Moscow is already thinking about the next, extremely lucrative Syrian chapter: reconstruction.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> On 20 September 2017, the "Syria Reconstruction Fair" was held in Damascus, with a large Russian, Chinese and Iranian presence.