

The Syrian Conflict: A Hostage to Geopolitics

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If one thing has become clear after eight years of war it is that the international community has unequivocally failed when it comes to finding a solution to the Syrian conflict. Despite international intervention being considered at one point, on the grounds of the responsibility to protect the civilian population (RtoP), the fact is that divisions within the Security Council prevented this from happening. The option of a negotiated solution was also unsuccessful, despite, at the outset, the 2012 Geneva Declaration and, later, Resolution 2254 in 2015 laying the foundations for a resolution of the conflict based on the formation of a caretaker government, the approval of a new Constitution and the holding of legislative and presidential elections with international oversight. Both proposals were based on constructive ambiguity, shedding little light on what would become of President Bashar al-Assad, which is the real Gordian knot of the problem.

The first stumbling block in finding a negotiated solution to the Syrian conflict was the intensification of geopolitical tensions. On the one hand, between the United States and Russia, and, on the other, between the regional powers, with Saudi Arabia and Iran leading the pack. This clash has given rise to a proxy war that has totally destabilized the Middle East. The polarization of ideologies has prevented any kind of detente between the parties involved in the conflict and, at the same time, has led to the intensification of sectarianism, with jihadist groups bursting onto the scene, such as the self-named Islamic State (IS) or the al-Nusra Front (now rebranded as the Front for the Conquest of the Levant). In this war by proxy, the

regime has received the unconditional support of Iran and Russia, while opposition and rebel groups have been backed to some extent by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Emirates, as well as the US and certain European countries.

The problem has been further aggravated because the contenders in the Syrian conflict are guided by a zero-sum game logic, in which there can only be a winner and a loser. As a result, the middle ground is eliminated, leaving little room for negotiation or agreements as both parties are defending maximalist positions and believe they must win at all costs, any concessions, therefore, being out of the question.

The US and Russia: A New Cold War?

Added to the regional tensions is a changing international scenario in which the United States seems to be pulling out of the Middle East, while Russia is trying to make an impressive comeback. The military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, in the context of the global war on terror declared by George W. Bush after 9/11, ended in similar failures. Hence, Barack Obama's reluctance to get actively involved in the turbulent waters of the Middle East. After the outbreak of the war in Syria, the US Administration followed an ambivalent policy, condemning Bashar al-Assad's repressive tactics, but refusing to offer the military technology required by the rebels to repel the regime's devastating airstrikes. Not even the use of chemical weapons on Ghouta in the summer of 2013, described by Obama himself as a red line, did anything to modify this position. The turning point came in the summer of 2014 with IS' proclamation of the jihadist caliphate. This sparked the formation of an international coalition to halt the movement and an increase in military aid for the YPG (the Kurdish

People's Protection Units), the backbone of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which defeated IS on the ground.

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After his arrival in the White House, Donald Trump made a great show of his will to reach an agreement with Russia to combat IS and find a solution to the Syrian conflict. On 11 November 2017, he declared: "We can save many, many, many lives by making a deal with Russia having to do with Syria."¹ Today, the North American Administration seems to have pushed Syria into the background and is focusing all its efforts on Iran. In the summer of 2018, the United States withdrew from the nuclear deal reached three years previous by the G5+1 and, a year later, imposed new economic sanctions on the Iranian regime, which it accuses of destabilizing the Middle East through its interference in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon, with its proxies and local allies. Reinstating sanctions forms part of a further-reaching strategy which entails turning up the pressure on the Iranian regime to strangle it economically. Trump believes this will force Iran to renegotiate the deal from a weak position, which, according to this logic, will lead to the country giving in to substantial concessions. It is also worth noting that Washington does not have sufficient resources to impose a *Pax Americana* in Syria. Despite President Trump having threatened on numerous occasions to withdraw the 2,000 US soldiers deployed in the country's northeast, the fact is that the Kurdish card is the only one he can play in the future to have an influence in post-war Syria. American troops are stationed on the eastern banks of the Euphrates River, which is controlled by

the YPG. The Kurdish militias have taken advantage of the fight against IS not just to impose their authority in Afrin, Kobane and Jazira, the three cantons of Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), but also to spread to other predominantly Arab areas, like Raqqa, the former capital of the ephemeral jihadist caliphate, and thereby take control of the country's main oil and gas fields, which are vital for guaranteeing the survival of Kurdish autonomy. With the YPG, the US is trying to put into practice what it did in Iraq in 1991, when it enforced no-fly zones to stop any kind of attempt by the Iraqi regime to use military force to recover Iraqi Kurdistan. This strategy is considered by the Syrian regime and its allies as a blatant violation of its sovereignty that calls into question its territorial integrity. With things as they are, Trump could settle for a *Pax Russica* that would put an end to the conflict, as long as it respects his interests, which include Iran withdrawing its troops from the Arab country and Rojava enjoying broad autonomy.

This all leads us to the conclusion that the only international actor capable of imposing a political solution to the Syrian conflict is Russia, a solution which would obviously not be an unbiased one and would imply the perpetuation of Bashar al-Assad's rule. Since the decision was taken in September 2015 to intervene to avoid the regime's collapse, Moscow's influence in Syria and the Middle East has only gained in strength. Russia's intervention has marked a sea change in the conflict, as since it entered the scene, government forces have recovered a large part of the territory that had been lost, to the extent that the regime now controls two-thirds of the country, with the remaining third in the hands of the US-protected YPG and, to a lesser extent, the diverse rebel factions (which include anything from the jihadist Victory Front, to the recently constituted National Front for Liberation).

The Syrian conflict has allowed Russia to return to the Middle East, a hugely important area from a geo-strategic standpoint, and to reclaim its prominence on the international panorama. It should be remembered that Moscow has two major military bases on Syrian soil. The bigger of the two is the Tartus naval facility, which is the Russian fleet's only base throughout the Mediterranean. However, it has also taken

¹ "We can save many, many, many lives by making a deal with Russia having to do with Syria," *The Independent*, 11 November 2017: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/donald-trump-russia-probe-vladimir-putin-apec-summit-vietnam-manafort-us-election-a8049571.html.

advantage of the situation to build the Khmeimim air base, which is Russia's biggest outside of its borders. In addition, Russian state-run companies like Soyuzneftegaz have obtained lucrative contracts to exploit Syria's hydrocarbon reserves over the coming decades, and Moscow is expected to take part in the country's reconstruction, which, paradoxically, its own air force has helped to destroy during systematic airstrikes on rebel-held areas. This combination of factors has practically made Syria a national security issue for the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Not only has Russia intervened militarily, but it has also brokered the Astana talks. Where the UN failed, Moscow has achieved certain success with the implementation of de-escalation zones which, despite repeated breaches, have contributed to calming the conflict. It has also managed to garner support for this strategy from Iran and Turkey, two key actors in the area with troops stationed on Syrian soil, which have also agreed to sponsor the talks held in the Kazakh capital. The Sochi Summit held on 22 November 2017 revealed the understanding that exists between Moscow, Tehran and Ankara through the roadmap drafted to resolve the Syrian conflict.

Russia also maintains close ties with Israel, whose greatest priority is to prevent Iran having a permanent military presence on neighbouring soil, for which it has launched frequent attacks on Revolutionary Guard bases and their weapons depots. In fact, Russia would also be interested in restricting Iranian influence in post-war Syria, to get closer to the Gulf oil monarchies and, in particular, Saudi Arabia, Iran's biggest rival in the region, whose economic contribution could be key to the reconstruction process. Putin is fully aware that for the *Pax Russica* to be successful, he needs the support of both Israel and the US, whose interests he needs to keep in mind. Moscow's two red lines are keeping Assad in power and preserving Syria's territorial integrity. Everything else is negotiable.

The Great Regional Game

The country that might come off worse from a possible *Pax Russica* agreed with the US and Israel is Iran.

Like Russia, the Iranian regime decided to intervene militarily in Syria to try to prevent the fall of its strategic ally Bashar al-Assad. The survival of the Syrian President is key to guaranteeing the main supply route for Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia political party and militant group, which stretches from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. In the opinion of the French political scientist Fatiha Dazi-Héni, "Syria is a major front in Tehran's geostrategic competition with the United States, its cold war with Saudi Arabia and its war against Salafis and al-Qaeda affiliated groups, whose hatred of Shiism is well known. Tehran perceives the collapse of the Assad regime as an inauspicious move that could checkmate Hezbollah and the Islamic republic."²

Over the last eight years, Iran has lent its political, economic and military support to Bashar, which has been vital in keeping him in power amid a climate of growing internal opposition. As well as giving Syria lines of credit to the value of over 7 billion dollars (half of which is linked to the purchase of crude oil), Tehran has mobilized Hezbollah and other Iraqi, Afghani and Pakistani Shia militias who have been trained and armed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. This situation led Riad Hijab, the opposition leader and former Syrian Prime Minister to denounce that "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander] Qassem Soleimani."³ In fact, one of the Trump Administration's main demands for lifting sanctions on Iran is precisely that it ends its proxy intervention in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.

The economic crisis that Iran is undergoing as a result of the return of sanctions has forced it to freeze economic support for Bashar al-Assad, enabling Moscow to secure its position, to the detriment of Tehran. In fact, the Iranian foreign agenda is receiving less attention than its domestic one, which now dominates the country's politics. Minimizing the extent to which sanctions are damaging Iran's economy has become a priority and it has resumed its nuclear programme by boosting its uranium enrichment to levels prior to the pact with the G5+1.

Therefore, the cost of Iran's intervention far and away exceeds the returns it has so far yielded. Tehran is

² DAZI-HÉNI, Fatiha. "Saudi Arabia versus Iran: Regional Balance of Power," *Awraq*, n° 8, 2013, p. 24.

³ *Al-Arabiyya*, 11 February 2013.

hoping that the end of the war will not only allow it to establish permanent military bases on Syrian soil, but also to capitalize on the lucrative contracts it has so far signed, which, it is worth noting, includes the concession of a new mobile telephone company and the exploitation of Palmyra's phosphate mines for a period of 99 years. Less certain is the construction of a 1,500-kilometre oil pipeline to the Mediterranean port of Baniyas to export Iranian oil, especially in a context of returning sanctions and the collapse of the Iranian economy. The US' military presence in north eastern Syria poses a threat to all these projects. Furthermore, in recent months, Russia has taken important steps to limit Iran's influence in Syria, in what could be read as a clear attempt to approach the Gulf oil monarchies, so they agree to partake in the country's reconstruction.

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The so-called Sunni bloc should also be included among the big losers of the Syrian conflict. This heterogeneous bloc, which includes Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Emirates, seems to have thrown in the towel once and for all and resigned themselves to Bashar al-Assad remaining in power. Throughout the eight years of war, the rivalry between the members themselves of this bloc has contributed to weakening the Syrian opposition, which is divided into myriad formations whose very survival depends directly on economic assistance from the Gulf oil monarchies. At the height of the conflict, there were reckoned to be over 1,000 different rebel groups, each dependent on its respective sponsor and their particular strategies. In the case of Saudi Arabia, intervention in the Syrian war was linked with the need to halt Iran's regional influence, but also to stop the winds of change of the

Arab Spring in their tracks. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the US military intervention in the Middle East following the 9/11 attacks had a high cost for Saudi Arabia, as the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq primarily benefited Iran, which saw two of its main regional rivals disappear. The fall of Bashar al-Assad would have allowed Riyadh to recover part of its lost territory and, at the same time, cut off Iranian influence in Lebanese politics through its sponsorship of Hezbollah.

The domino effect caused by the so-called Arab Spring was also something feared by Saudi Arabia. The demands for freedom, democracy and social justice were seen by Riyadh as an existential threat to the Saudi Monarchy. The large-scale popular mobilizations in Bahrain triggered a vigorous response through the sending of troops to brace the Khalifa dynasty. This did nothing to prevent demonstrations being held among Saudi Arabia's Shia population, which were repressed through the execution of its organizers.

Saudia Arabia responded to Iran's growing interventionism in the Middle East by stepping up sectarianism both inside and outside the kingdom. On a domestic scale, the Saudi regime emphasized its sectarian policies to "suppress domestic calls for political change, isolate the Shia minority and delay Islamist mobilization."⁴ The aim was simply to divide the population along sectarian lines and, in particular, underscore the confessional divide between the Sunni majority and Shia minority. Externally, Saudi Arabia has tried to mobilize the Arab League and Islamic Conference in favour of its ideas, although it has failed to establish a Sunni military coalition to face up to Iran.

In light of the failure of the military option in Syria, the Sunni bloc has been forced to revise its strategy and has set out to normalize ties with Bashar al-Assad with the intention of distancing him from Iran. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have reopened their embassies in Damascus, Jordan has resumed trade through the Nasib border crossing, Qatar has reestablished direct flights, Egypt has received Syria's powerful security chief Ali Mamlouk and the Omani Foreign Affairs Minister has met with the Syrian President. All these moves have been accompanied by an intense debate as to whether the moment has arrived for the Arab League to readmit Syria into its

⁴ RASHEED, Madawi. "Saudi Arabia's Domestic Sectarian Politics," *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre Policy Brief*, August 2013.

ranks. This option is gaining increasing support from the likes of Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan and Algeria. As is often the case these days, Saudi Arabia will have the last word on the subject. In all likelihood, for a decision of such magnitude, prior consultation will be sought with the Trump Administration and there will be conditions to try to reduce Iranian influence in post-war Syria.

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This analysis would be incomplete without addressing Turkey's position, whose errors in calculation have forced it to apply frequent shifts in its strategy. Turkey was one of the first countries to intervene in Syria and is probably the stakeholder that has paid most highly for its involvement in the conflict, due to the arrival of three million refugees on its territory, the intensification of the Kurdish conflict and the terrorist attacks on the tourism industry, as well as the disagreements with Russia and the US concerning the strategy to follow in Syria.⁵

During these eight years, Ankara has gone from calling for al-Assad's head to settling for establishing a buffer zone around the border to avoid it being controlled by the PYD's Kurdish militants. Today, President Erdogan's top priority is to stop a federal state from being established in which Rojava enjoys full autonomy. In an effort to counteract the PYD's growing weight, Ankara launched the Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield military operations thanks to which it took control of Jarabulus, Azaz and Afrin, where its local allies have developed a systematic campaign to "repatriate" the Kurdish population and "ethnically reconfigure the predominantly Kurdish district" with the arrival of thousands of displaced

Sunni Arabs, some of which are from former rebel regions.⁶

Ankara has progressively distanced itself from Washington and has been coordinating with Moscow and Tehran to search for a negotiated solution to the Syrian conflict through the Astana talks. In September 2018, Turkey and Russia signed a memorandum to instate a demilitarized zone on the border between the provinces of Hama, Aleppo and Idlib, which is still in place, despite the involved parties' repeated breaches. Turkey's main bargaining chip is its military presence in the border area and its alliance with different rebel groups connected with the National Front for Liberation. However, its position has steadily weakened as its local allies have lost ground. At the same time, its struggle against the YPG has given rise to a number of clashes with the Trump Administration. Hence, the only chance its interests will be considered in postwar Syria is if there is a *Pax Russica* which respects Syria's territorial integrity and reinstates the centralized State, without offering significant concessions to the Kurdish minority.

A Pax Russica?

The Syrian conflict has become a hostage to regional geopolitics. As it stands today, the only stakeholder with the capacity to impose an agreement is Russia, although it would be no easy task, since the *Pax Russica* will have to take into account the interests of the main powers present in the country. For Moscow, it is essential that the agreement protects Bashar al-Assad and guarantees Syrian territorial integrity, demands also shared by Iran, a country which has backpedalled on its positions as a consequence of the reinstatement of trade sanctions. Turkey would agree to normalize relations with the Syrian regime if there is a commitment to neutralize the Kurdish militias and put an end to Rojava's autonomy. Lastly, the *Pax Russica* will also require the approval of the US and Israel, who demand an end to Iran's military presence. If he is able to meet the demands of such a diverse range of stakeholders, Putin will have managed to square the circle.

⁵ BENLI ALTUNISIK, Maliha. "The Inflexibility of Turkey's Policy in Syria," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2016*, p. 39.

⁶ RINI, Ferhat. "Turkey's Lack of Vision in Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February, 26 2019: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78450>.