

# SYRIAN CIVIL WAR: LIMITATIONS AND PRECONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE MULTILATERALISM IN AN EVERMORE CONFLICTUAL MULTIPOLAR WORLD

*René Rieger\**

## Introduction

The Syrian civil war might very well be the most complex and multi-faceted armed conflict in modern history. What started in the spring of 2011 as an internal Syrian conflict between the al-Assad regime and a quickly growing opposition developed into a multi-layered war involving numerous internal and external actors. Almost six years into the civil war, the conflict features hundreds of domestic warring factions forming ever-changing coalitions that largely fight against the al-Assad regime and its allies while repeatedly engaging in fights among themselves; the direct and indirect intervention of regional and supra-regional powers; and two de facto regimes, Rojava and Daesh, of which particularly the latter transcends Syria's national borders.

So far, all attempts at multilateral conflict resolution, including the most recent attempts by Iran, Turkey and Russia, have failed to exceed temporary, fragile ceasefires and the chemical disarmament of the Syrian regime. The root cause of the failure of effective multilateralism ranging from the blockade of the UN Security Council to the unfruitful end of the Vienna process is the concurrence of incongruous interests and the unwillingness to compromise on the part of most, if not all, key conflict parties.

In order to draw meaningful conclusions from previous failed attempts at conflict reduction, let alone resolution, it is essential to highlight the irreconcilability of the conflicts of interest among involved factions. Domestic factions, namely the Syrian regime and the heterogenic opposition, are not interested in anything less than the full destruction of the other. Daesh, whose eventual defeat as a territory holding entity in Syria and neighbouring Iraq is by now merely a matter of time, fights as mortal enemies all who do not obey its self-proclaimed rule. Turkey fears the de facto statehood of Kurdish-controlled Rojava across its southern border as a dangerous precedent that could seriously jeopardise its

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\*Chairman of the Middle East and International Affairs Research Group (MEIA Research), Associate Researcher at the Center for Applied Policy Research (CAP)

territorial integrity. For Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite militia fighting devotedly and valiantly at al-Assad's side, the survival of the current Syrian regime is indivisibly connected to its own viability.

In the perspective of the remaining external conflict parties partaking in the country's civil war, Syria itself is of only subordinate significance. The Syrian civil war has long become a two-fold proxy war between the United States and Russia on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Iran on the other. The opposing parties in these proxy wars, supported by state and non-state actors, battle for regional influence in a scenario guided by a zero-sum game mindset. The absolute determination to retain and advance one's own regional influence and contain and ideally roll back the influence of one's opponent recalls the Cold War logic that characterised many proxy conflicts during the better part of the second half of the 20th century.

Against this backdrop, it seems that there are only two scenarios for a termination of the Syrian civil war: the absolute triumph of one warring faction or alliance over all others or a lasting ceasefire based on a reconciliation of interests. The latter scenario seems only plausible in cases in which a significant change in the current balance of power gives one faction or alliance an advantage great enough to force its opponents to capitulate. It appears that such change in the balance of power could only occur when external players substantially alter their prior Syria policy by modifying either their previous material support of conflict factions or the magnitude of their direct military involvement in the civil war. This, in turn, would have to be based on a recalculation of interests and priorities on the part of at least one major external player.

In late 2016, after the re-conquest of Aleppo by the al-Assad regime, Russia has significantly reduced its military involvement in the Syrian civil war. However, Russia remains a steadfast ally of al-Assad, and would most likely re-increase its military involvement should the Syrian regime's enemies take the upper hand again. Initial statements and actions by the Trump administration suggest that the United States will continue to lead the air strikes against Daesh both in Iraq and Syria. In addition, the proposed enforcement of safe zones in northern Syria would require a significant increase in US military involvement in the country's civil war and possibly even put the US military in direct military conflict with al-Assad forces. Considering the continuous involvement of regional and global players in the Syrian civil war, a conflict settlement seems only plausible based on a reconciliation of interests among external conflict actors, predominantly the United States and Russia.

In the following, I will highlight the main interests of external actors in the Syrian civil war and suggest that a conflict settlement will require a political rapprochement between the United States, major European countries and Russia. According to this logic, effective

multilateralism can help facilitate a lasting ceasefire and contribute to a sustainable conflict settlement. However, it will require compromises between external actors on issues that to a large extent do not directly relate to Syria.

## External Actors' Interests in and Influence on the Syrian Civil War

### The Saudi-Iranian Cold War and Hezbollah's Fight for Survival

Saudi-Iranian relations have never been conflict-free. Before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the two states shared many characteristics and interests: both were conservative monarchies in alliance with the United States, supportive of regional stability and allied against progressive pan-Arab, revolutionary republican and leftist state and non-state actors in the MENA region. However, the two states were also at odds in several regards: their stance towards Israel, oil price policy, and most importantly Iran's hegemonic claims in the Gulf region and its power projection onto the Arabian Peninsula. In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Saudi-Iranian relations deteriorated quickly, considerably and lastingly. This was largely due to the new Iranian regime's progressive attempts to export its anti-monarchical, Shiite revolution to Arab Gulf states with Shiite majorities (Iraq and Bahrain) and substantial minorities (mainly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia), its challenging of the Saudi leadership's claim to leadership in the Islamic World, and Saudi Arabia's support of Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Following the end of the First Gulf War, the death of Khomeini, and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Saudi-Iranian relations experienced a thaw and, under Iranian reformer Mohammad Khatami's presidency, real rapprochement. However, following the US-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent collapse of the regional power into chaos, Saudi-Iranian relations deteriorated again as both states attempted to gain a foothold in Iraq by fuelling and taking advantage of growing sectarian violence in their mutual neighbouring state. Iran's accelerated nuclear programme as well as Iranian exertion of influence in Lebanon and Palestine only made things worse.

Starting in 2011, Saudi-Iranian relations deteriorated further. In the turmoil caused by the so-called Arab Spring, both states saw opportunities to increase their regional influence and roll back that of the other. Iran vocally supported the anti-government protests against the pro-Saudi regime in Bahrain and improved relations with Saudi Arabia's ally Egypt during Mohammed Mursi's presidency. In the summer of 2011, Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, saw the evolving situation in Syria as an opportunity to strike a painful blow to Iran's influence in the Arab world. At first, the Saudi leadership had attempted to de-escalate the incipient Syrian civil war by appealing to President al-Assad to end the violence and address the demands of his people. However, by August 2011, with the Free Syrian Army having meanwhile taken control over considerable parts of the Syrian territory and the regime's violence having further escalated, the Saudi leadership publicly called for the

al-Assad regime to step down. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia began to grant oppositional groups material support. The escalation of violence by an Alawite-dominated regime allied with Shiite Iran against a majority Sunni population had put domestic pressure on the Saudi leadership to take sides on behalf of the Syrian opposition. Additionally, having the false expectation that the downfall of al-Assad was imminent, Riyadh decided to help in the process, and, by doing so, remove from power the only Arab regime closely allied with Iran.

From the Saudi perspective, the Syrian civil war offers a unique opportunity to roll back Iran's regional influence. Should the al-Assad regime fall, Iran would not only lose an important ally in the Arab world but the only transit route to its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, long a painful thorn in Saudi Arabia's side. With UNIFIL preventing Hezbollah from getting weapons supplies by water, the land route via Syria is the militia's only external supply line. Hence, the fall of the Syrian regime would constitute a threefold win for Saudi Arabia. At first reluctant to support radical Islamist forces among the Syrian opposition, the Saudi leadership has gradually enlarged the circle of benefactors of its material support. By now, Riyadh's support also reaches radical Islamist and Jihadist factions that in their ideology only marginally distinguish themselves from Al-Qaeda and Daesh.

Conversely, the Iranian regime considers the political and military survival of al-Assad's rule a top priority. In an attempt to avoid a painful loss in regional influence and in the zero-sum game Tehran has long been playing with Riyadh, Iran has early on in the civil war started to send weapons and specialised Revolutionary Guardsmen to support al-Assad's cause.

Paradoxically, both Saudi Arabia and Iran see themselves on the defensive. The Saudi regime has for years felt encircled and beset by what they, often exaggeratedly, consider Iranian proxies and allies: the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Syrian al-Assad regime, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government and powerful Iraqi Shiite militias, Iranian agents and pro-Iranian actors among the Shiite population groups in Kuwait, Bahrain, and the oil-rich Saudi Eastern Province, and finally the Zaidi Houthi rebels in Yemen who, with support of former Yemeni Prime Minister Ali Abdullah Saleh, have managed to take control over large parts of the country including the capital Sana'a. Additionally, Riyadh fears that Iran's economic recovery following the lifting of most international sanctions will give Tehran the financial means to increase support for its regional allies and intensify its subversive activities in the Arab world. The increasingly estranged US-Saudi relationship during the Obama administration coupled with a slow US-Iranian rapprochement further increased Saudi fears of Iran's regional power status and foreign policy activities. Additionally, compared to his predecessor, Saudi King Salman has an even more negative view of the Iranian regime or, as some call it, an even worse case of "Iranoia". Hence, from the Saudi leadership's perspective,

toppling the Syrian regime is a necessary step in the crucial containment of Iran's expanding regional reach. In the Iranian perspective, on the other hand, the preservation of the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut axis is essential, as one would otherwise suffer a painful loss with respect to one's rightful regional power status.

Both regimes are steadfast in their Syria policy; the diametrically opposed objectives they are both fighting for are too vital. At the current stage, conflict de-escalation between the two regional powers is a long way away. For a while, the common goal of defeating Daesh appeared to be a chance for a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. However, the latter retreated into the far distance amidst Iranian verbal attacks on the Saudi leadership following the stampede during the *hajj* in September 2015 and the termination of diplomatic relations following the execution of the Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr and the subsequent looting of the Saudi embassy in Tehran in early January 2016. With tensions flying high, there currently seems to be no realistic scenario in which the two states would find a reconciliation of interests with de-escalating effects on the civil war in Syria.

As mentioned above, Syria under al-Assad rule is an essential lifeline for Hezbollah as it serves as a conduit for Iranian material support. Hence, the Syrian civil war has from the beginning been a fight for survival for the Lebanese militia. This both explains Hezbollah's active participation in the conflict in support of the Syrian regime and practically rules out a change of the militia's Syria policy.

#### **Turkey's Fear for its Territorial Integrity**

Early on, Turkey involved itself in the Syrian civil war. At first, Ankara, calling for the al-Assad regime to step down amidst their forces' escalating violence against protestors and rebels, supported the Arab League's decision to sanction Syria, sheltered and trained Syrian army defectors, supported the formation of the Free Syrian Army, and provided a platform for the Syrian National Council that later merged with other opposition factions into the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a self-proclaimed government in exile. In 2012, tensions between Turkey and Syria intensified following Syria's shooting down of a Turkish fighter jet over the Mediterranean Sea and Syrian shelling of the Turkish border town Akcakale. In the following two years, numerous border clashes occurred between Turkish and Syrian armed forces. In February 2015, a Turkish army convoy equipped with tanks entered Syrian territory to evacuate the Turkish military garrison guarding the Suleyman Shah Tomb<sup>1</sup> and relocate the tomb closer to the Turkish border.

<sup>1</sup> According to the 1921 Treaty of Ankara, reaffirmed by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Turkey has the legal right to hoist its flag over the Suleyman Shah Tomb and guard it with soldiers. The grave of the grandfather of Osman I, the Ottoman Empire's founder, has been located within the territorial boundaries of Syria both before and after its 1973 relocation. A Turkish-Syrian protocol signed in 2003 grants Turkey transit rights through Syrian territory.

Besides supporting Syrian opposition forces in their fight against the al-Assad regime, Turkey has been actively engaged against the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG). For one thing, the Turkish government seeks to prevent the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen and Assyrian factions headed by the PYD to successfully establish an autonomous state comprising all of Syria's northern territory bordering Turkey. From the Turkish government's perspective, this would constitute a dangerous precedent that could amplify Turkish Kurds' ambitions to establish an independent state in Turkey's southeast. Turkey's rejecting stance towards the PYD/YPG is additionally due to their affiliation with Ankara's declared Kurdish nemesis, the PKK. Hence, the Turkish government has been taking actions to weaken the PYD/YPG's position in northern Syria. Although the full extent of the measures remains blurry, one can say with certainty that the Turkish government has established an economic blockade of Rojava, lobbied internationally against support for the YPG, rejected fighting alongside the Kurdish militia against Daesh, supported enemies of the YPG among Syrian opposition forces, and directly attacked the YPG on several occasions.

In mid-February 2016, the Turkish military initiated heavy artillery shelling of Kurdish positions in North Aleppo and Azaz. This occurred after Turkish forces had already hit YPG targets in October of the previous year. On 24 August 2016, the Turkish military entered Syria in order to prevent the advancing SDF from taking control of territory north of Al Bab previously held by Daesh. Although Ankara claimed the fight against Daesh as the main reason for its military incursion, the key objective was the prevention of Kurdish control over a contiguous land corridor stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Turkey is not expected anytime soon to significantly change its position towards the Syrian civil war in general and Syrian Kurdish forces in particular unless they are being hard-pressed by third parties with significant leverage over Ankara. Both the United States and Russia have political and economic leverage over Turkey. In light of difficult relations with the Obama administration due to US support for Kurdish forces in Syria, Erdogan's reaction to the July 2016 coup attempt, and US unwillingness to extradite Fethullah Gülen, Turkey has sought closer relations with Russia.

However, Erdogan's apparent attempt to play off Russia and the United States against one another could come to a sudden end should the anticipated US-Russian rapprochement take place in 2017. Then again, the Trump administration's latest calls for safe, i.e. demilitarised, zones in northern Syria takes up a proposal the Turkish government has brought forward repeatedly over the past years. From the Turkish perspective, the enforcement of safe zones, a notion constantly rejected by the Obama White House, would both reduce the economically and socially burdening refugee



streams crossing into Turkey and weaken Kurdish control over northern Syria. Hence, the change in the White House might serve Turkish interests after all.

### **The Resurgence of US-Russian Cold War Mentality and Europe's Refugee Problem**

Almost six years into the conflict, the Syrian civil war has long turned into a proxy war between the United States and Russia with key EU states either leaning towards the US position or failing to mediate.

From the Russian perspective, the Syrian crisis offers both challenges and opportunities. Good relations with the Syrian regime dating back to the Soviet era grant Moscow access to the MENA region and allow for Russian power projection in the Mediterranean Sea. Access to the harbour at Tartus plays an important role in this regard. However, despite extensive Russian weapons sales to Algeria uncoupled with strong political ties, pragmatic Russian-Iranian ties, recent Putin-Sisi flirtations, and some increased influence on the policies and economies of Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Turkey, Russia does not have any close ally in the larger MENA region other than the Syrian al-Assad regime. Hence, the survival of the latter is of great strategic importance to Russia.

Furthermore, Russia's military intervention in support of al-Assad, initialised in the fall of 2015 when al-Assad's troops were on the brink of defeat, has brought significant advantages. Firstly, Moscow can demonstrate military power in a fairly limited conflict in which it operates by far the most sophisticated equipment. This demonstration of power both helps Putin domestically and sends a strong message to regimes in the MENA region and beyond that Russia stands with its allies and has returned to the global game as a power projecting force. Unlike the legally controversial US-led air strikes against Daesh targets within Syria's territorial borders, Russia's military support for al-Assad is in principle in conformity with international law.<sup>2</sup> Despite the bad press Russia is receiving for its actions in Syria, particularly in the West, the principal legality of its military actions gives Russia some normative edge in the non-Western world, both on the media front and in the international arena. Lastly, in the course of its military involvement in Syria, Russia deployed state-of-the-art air defence capabilities to Syria and established a sizeable naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. This might give Russia lasting Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities far beyond Syrian territorial borders affecting NATO territory (Turkey) as well as other Western states and their partners (Cyprus, Jordan, Israel).

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, one has to distinguish between *ius ad bellum* (the right to war) and *ius in bello* (the law of war). With respect to *ius ad bellum*, Russia's intervention is in accordance with established international law as the legally legitimate Syrian government invited Russia to intervene militarily in its territory. Whether Russia's apparent indiscriminate bombing of residential areas and lacking attempts to minimise civilian casualties constitutes a breach of international humanitarian law (law of war), is a separate legal question.

Consequently, it seems unlikely that Russia is going to reduce its involvement in Syria in support of the al-Assad regime unless other more pressing interests move the Kremlin to revise its previous policy.

In the past years, the United States and its European NATO partners have observed Russia's foreign policy actions with considerable concern and unease, among them Russia's military engagement in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and the exertion of significant influence in Eastern Ukraine, the build-up of troops and A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad coupled with repeated violations of NATO air space in the Baltics, and the influencing of the media, political discourses, and potentially even elections in Western countries through the help of trolls and hackers. Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war and its increased power projection in the Levant add to this concern.

In what recalls Cold War dynamics, NATO states and particularly the United States have attempted to contain and roll back Russian influence in Eastern Europe and the MENA region. Anti-Russian sanctions and the reduction or suspension of discussion forums (e.g., NATO-Russia Council, G8), have reinforced the intransigence on the part of both sides in the struggle for influence. Syria is merely one theatre of this complex conflict. In addition, the Syrian regime, due to its close relations with Iran and its support for terrorist organisations such as Hezbollah has long been a thorn in US and European eyes. Moreover, the humanitarian catastrophe in the course of the Syrian civil war being reported widely in the Western media forced both the United States and key EU states – cultivating the image of normative powers – to take a stance against the al-Assad regime. Hence, both the United States and their European allies have early on called for the al-Assad regime to step down and have subsequently given political, material, logistical and also limited direct military support to different Syrian opposition groups. It remains to be seen how the US policy towards Syria will change under the Trump administration. However, if the first days of Trump's presidency are any indication, the United States will continue to be involved in the Syrian civil war positioned against both the al-Assad regime and Daesh.

For European states, the seemingly irreconcilable Syrian civil war has more negative repercussions than the increase of Russia's regional power status. Streams of millions of Syrian refugees put pressure on the stability of Syria's neighbouring states and have for years been seeking their way to Europe causing considerable economic, logistical, political, societal and security challenges. The refugee crisis, of which the Syrian civil war has been an important source of origin, has sent the economically-hurting and already politically-disunited EU into a nearly existential crisis. Therefore, eradicating the root causes of refugee streams from Syria is of great importance to EU members. However, the past years have shown that they have failed to bring about any meaningful and lasting de-escalation of the Syrian civil war.



## The Need for a Holistic Approach

The preceding analysis has shown the hardened fronts between external conflict parties in the Syrian civil war. It seems unlikely that the civil war can be solved by one party defeating all others. With foreign actors continuously supporting opposing conflict factions, the war might drag on for years. Due to their irreconcilable interests, foreign actors have so far failed to find a compromise that would de-escalate and eventually terminate the civil war.

Therefore, it seems that the only way to reach a conflict resolution is a scenario in which external actors find a reconciliation of interests beyond the Syrian issue. In this regard, the most promising step would be re-intensified interaction, bargaining and eventually a rapprochement between the United States, its European allies and Russia on all issues touching common interests. Simply put, finding a compromise on Syria will require a US-Euro-Russian grand bargain on such issues as the status of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea, the security of the Baltics, the future of NATO, Russia's role in the MENA region, Russian gas shipments to Europe and multilateral trade relations in general. In order for this grand bargain to work, all players will need to meet at eye level, reduce their negative reporting and indeed propaganda about each other, establish a scheme of regular bi- and multilateral meetings on all levels of government and come to terms with the fact that a full realisation of one's interests is a phantasm that needs to be put to rest. Particularly, the Western states need to realise that peaceful and cooperative relations with Russia will require concessions with regard to some of the latter's key demands. As painful as such compromises would be, the cost of not compromising would be too great for all sides.

Concrete elements that seem essential for a US-Euro-Russian deal to work include: a) a medium-term moratorium on EU and NATO eastward enlargement (particularly regarding states such as Ukraine, Serbia, Kosovo and Georgia); b) the de facto recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea in the context of a multilateral agreement emphasising the invulnerability of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly mentioning the Baltic states; c) troop reduction in Eastern Europe and Kaliningrad; d) an end of Russia's anti-Western media campaign and cyber attacks; e) termination of all sanctions; f) readmission of Russia to the G8 forum; g) revival of the NATO-Russia Council; and h) a long-term Euro-Russian energy delivery deal.

Certainly, a US-Euro-Russian compromise regarding Syria based on a grand bargain would not miraculously solve the civil war. However, it would be an important and indispensable first step.

It seems that the most realistic scenario for a lasting conflict settlement entails a federal solution for Syria granting the al-Assad regime, Kurdish forces and non-Kurdish

opposition forces semi-autonomy over areas they control within a persisting Syrian state. Russia's influence on al-Assad and, to a much lesser degree, on Iran, US influence on Saudi Arabia, US-Euro-Russian influence on Turkey and previous Euro-US support of the opposition would go a long way to push regional actors to accept and support such a settlement. The new Trump administration, following a more pragmatic and Russophile approach, might bring to the table what it takes to change the current impasse.