



Syria's fragile balances and the looming threat of a new vicious circle of instability

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Despite the latest ceasefire in Idlib, tensions are once again rising across Syria. In the northwest, the high mobility in Idlib indicates that renewed fighting is rather a matter of timing, while in the south and east, escalating assassination campaigns in Daraa and Deir ez-Zor generate new dangerous dynamics. In central and eastern Syria, the resurgence of ISIS cells further exposes a severe security vacuum that opens way for intensive influence competition between the Kurds and the regime. Last but not least, the unprecedented economic crisis that face the country threatens to derail even the minimum stability enjoyed in Syria at the moment.

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In Idlib, strings are being pulled behind all embattled camps. Damascus reinforces its military presence around the enclave, while Russia pressures Turkey to withdraw from its encircled bases south of the M4 highway. Turkey's recent withdrawal from its Morek observation post -whose maintenance was utterly dependent on Russian security guarantees- reflects the conflict's mobility. Be that as it may, while indications of a new flare-up are in no shortage, the timing of a renewed offensive is rather difficult to predict. The regime is practically unable to carry out the fight by itself, and Moscow does not share Assad's rush for a new push. The sizable Turkish deployment along the frontline and the reinforcement of more defensible positions in Sahl al-Ghab, Jabal Zawiya, and Jisr al-Shughour compose a line that can hardly be bypassed. Notwithstanding, the frequent strikes in the opposition's territories are constant reminders of the regime's commitment to "liberate every inch of Syria". The recent Russian airstrike on a Faylaq al-Sham camp that killed more than seventy fighters, although related to the broader Russo-Turkish competition in regions such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Libya, is nonetheless indicative of the aforementioned commitment.¹ Therefore, while reinforcing its presence, Ankara strives to unite Idlib's rebels into a single army. It aims to contain jihadist groups and block the regime and Russia from playing the 'terrorists' elimination' card again. This endeavor, however, faces complications. Ahrar al-Sham, a prominent rebel group, is plagued by infighting, allegedly due to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) meddling with its internal politics. HTS, on its part, in doing Turkey's bidding, has unleashed a crackdown on Jihadist groups as it tries to reinvent itself as a moderate faction and dominate in Idlib. Subsequently, the crackdown generates centrifugal tendencies that may hinder Turkey's plans.² Nevertheless, while the persistent fragmentation in Idlib may very well play in favor of the regime, a new round of heavy clashes in the northwest is not the only reason for concern in the Syrian theater.

A spike in assassinations of high-profile former opposition members, tribal leaders, and regime officials threatens to destabilize Daraa province. The 2018 Russian-brokered reconciliation agreements in Daraa provided security guarantees to former rebels who reconciled with the regime. They were allowed to keep their light weapons and remain in charge of their areas. By that, Russia tried to fend off any Iranian entrenchment close to the Israeli and Jordanian borders by preventing a full return of the regime's security apparatus. It instead reserved a significant role for itself and the Russian-backed 5th Corps. Yet, as Tokmjayan notes, Russia's mediation did not fully 'pacify' the areas but merely traded an open-rebellion situation with one of low-intensity resistance.³ Indeed, as the assassinations' perpetrators remain mostly unknown, insecurity mounts in Daraa, with locals mainly pointing the finger at the regime. There have even been calls in late-October for rearmament. A potential derailment of the situation could benefit Damascus as it would present it with an opportunity to enforce heavy-handedly its rule. Nevertheless, given that former rebels in these areas are still armed, possess organizational experience, and maintain a relative combat readiness, an outbreak of mass violence would probably be an uphill task for the regime. Even if Moscow remains committed to its security guarantees, its ability to absorb crises in the south is already put at a test, with the odds of renewed rounds of heavy clashes remain all but limited.⁴

A similar situation evolves in northern and eastern Syria. Being already over-stretched, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is in control of the area, struggles to curb the resurgence of ISIS' cells. ISIS's multiple bombing attacks across the central Syrian Desert, Hassakah, and Deir ez-Zor provinces prove that. Additionally, an alarming series of assassinations of civilians and security personnel as well as Arab tribal leaders' expose SDF's operational limits and downgrades the trust that the latter enjoys with the local tribes. This situation has even opened the way for the formation of new tribal militias, as demonstrated in the al-Shuhayl tribe's case. The gradual release of hundreds of ISIS-affiliated people from the SDF-run detention camps may expedite the formation of similar militias. The security gaps in Deir ez-Zor may also prompt several tribal leaders to directly approach ISIS militants and seek non-aggression deals. That would empower the latter and complicate future SDF and western coalition's intelligence and counter-terrorism operations. Meanwhile, tribal frustration about the lack of significant Arab representation within the SDF is making ground for a

game of influence between the SDF and the Syrian regime.⁵

Notably, although the SDF-controlled areas are not the regime's priority compared to Idlib, it does not imply that Assad is indifferent about the consolidation of the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration of North and Eastern Syria (AANES) in these areas. After all, Damascus's whole war effort since 2012 has concentrated on obliterating any emerging administrative alternative. However, the American presence alongside the SDF limits the regime and Russia's options on the matter. Moscow is interested in restraining the regime's long arm and laying bridges between Damascus and the Kurds. The Kurds' inclusion is crucial for any success in the Geneva Peace Process. Furthermore, the regime desperately needs access to the country's oil fields, the majority of which is under the SDF control. Thus, Russia may pressure Assad into some concessions to lure the Kurds to the negotiating table. An agreement between the two sides could help circumvent Turkey's Kurdish veto in Geneva and simultaneously halve the US' footprint in eastern Syria.⁶ Nevertheless, if the regime's adamancy on the unconditional return of the SDF-controlled areas persists, and the Kurds continue to deepen their cooperation with the US -which now includes an oil agreement-, eastern Syria's deadlock will continue, and Russia will probably need to recalibrate its calculations for Geneva.⁷

Apart from all the above mentioned, to rub salt into Syria's wound, the economy's total collapse seems increasingly possible. The Syrian Pound's exchange rate against the Dollar has exceeded 2.800:1, and there is no access to Syrian money abroad due to Lebanon's financial crisis. In addition, the recent blast of Beirut's port has deprived Damascus of its last outlet to maritime trade amidst a global pandemic outbreak. Finally, the activation of US sanctions under the "Caesar Act", which prevents any entity or individual, Syrian or non-Syrian, from doing business with Damascus, may very well be the last nail in the Syrian economy's coffin. While the Trump administration declared that the Caesar Act aims to force the regime into adopting 'an entirely new set of behaviors', it is doubtful that this aim will be accomplished. Instead, by targeting the construction, electricity, and oil sectors and by prohibiting foreign aid organizations from delivering reconstruction assistance, the sanctions render any reconstruction project unfeasible. Though, having already survived ten years of civil war, Assad may not break as a result of the sanctions per se. However, the grim picture of 83% of the population living below the poverty line and roughly 9,3 million being food insecure is probably poised to get grimmer.⁸ In this context, reports indicate that the regime's popularity has spirals down like never before and criticism of the government's corruption and economic mismanagement are more pronounced. Social unrest is rising even in areas that remained calm during the war, such as Latakia and Sweida.⁹ In response, Assad blames the Lebanese financial crisis in an attempt to shift popular attention to external factors. He also downplays the sanctions' impact presumably in order to imply an effective Syrian resistance against the US and to prop-up his loyalists' moral.¹⁰ Yet, it is questionable if this approach can hold-out for long against the profound effects of the economic crisis on Syrians' livelihoods. Iran and Russia are unable to bail Damascus out from the financial predicament, and as the situation deteriorates, the possibility of renewed nation-wide protests is quite real.¹¹

As the ten years' dark anniversary of the civil war nears, the country faces one challenge after the other. Idlib and Daraa are powder kegs that can explode at any time. Meanwhile, a resurgent ISIS has begun to test both the regime's and AANES's capacities to provide security in their control areas. Yet, while the Kurds may continue to consolidate their presence in the north and eastern Syria with American support, there will be no time to rest for the regime in Damascus. Irrespective of Idlib's outcome, the economic crisis arguably represents for Assad a threat equal -if not graver- to the military ones. And with the Damocles sword of new nation-wide protests hanging over his head, only time will tell how Assad will react and how the next phase of the Syrian drama will evolve.

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