



## Syria's never-ending war(s); or why the end of the civil war does not mean peace

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***As the Syrian civil war nears its end, the regime's imminent victory against the remaining opposition forces in Idlib tends to be overshadowed by several emerging issues that threaten to trigger a new circle of instability. In the meantime, irrespective of any outcome in the north, another 'war' still rages and will continue to rage in the country. The one between Iran, which struggles to recover from the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, and Israel, which meticulously tries to fend off the former's entrenchment in the country.***

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The Syrian regime's latest offensive in Idlib has escalated and peaked with the reconquering of the M5 Damascus-Aleppo highway and the advance towards the M4 Aleppo-Latakia highway. By that, the regime benefits economically from the reopening of the M5 for trade and the reconnection of all the four largest cities of Syria (i.e., Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Aleppo). Most importantly, though, it benefits militarily by tightening its grip around the last rebel-held area in Syria, and even by encircling several Turkish military observation points south of the M4.<sup>1</sup> The initial Turkish reluctance in confronting Assad's forces -especially since the hostilities were taking place within 'de-escalation' zones- in effect gave the regime the 'green light' to push forward, thus provoking an arguably belated response from Ankara. The situation culminated in an agreement between Turkey and Russia on March 5, which provided for a ceasefire between Turkey and the Syrian regime and the creation of a buffer zone across the M4 monitored by Moscow and Ankara. Although the ceasefire may have typically stopped the regime's advance and prevented an all-out confrontation with Ankara, the situation remains fragile at best. On the pro-Assad camp, the establishment of joint Turkish-Russian patrols in the buffer-zone effectively solidifies the regime's gains in Idlib's south. In practice, Russian control over the southern part of the M4 implies the control for the Syrian regime itself.<sup>2</sup> It could be argued that if the push for maximum military gains in the face of Turkish warnings was based on a presumed timely Russian 'intervention', then Damascus' bet has indeed paid off. Also, for the Russians, a foothold on the M4 is of significant importance since future advances along the highway can secure their Khmeimim and Latakia bases from rebel attacks. That, in turn, is translated into enhanced operational capabilities for the regime in any future offensive.

On the opposition's camp, the rebels in Idlib and western Aleppo province are all the more cornered. They are overpowered by the combined superiority of the regime and Russian forces and seriously fragmented. The displacement of more than 900.000 people towards Idlib during the latest offensive, coupled with relentless airstrikes in residential areas and civilian infrastructure, has further deteriorated the already precarious living conditions.<sup>3</sup> The reliance on Turkey as a bulwark against the regime's advances also took a severe hit since the former's intervention does not seem to produce concrete reassurances on the freeze of hostilities. Moscow, despite the 'ceasefire', reserves the right to confront radical groups, and by extension, so does the regime, thus annulling the establishment of a "non-conflict regime" in practice. It is of note that the opposition also seems divided regarding the implementation of the ceasefire. Mainstream rebel factions are rather favorable of the deal, while many Jihadi-oriented groups such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham oppose and reject it. Hence, despite the military reinforcements that Ankara keeps transferring in the area, its ability to control the rebels and keep the ceasefire afloat remains dubious. This might as well evolve into a confrontation between Turkey and some of its 'former proxies' in the area, should the former decide to go all-in with its standing promise to Moscow for containing the radicals. However, such a turn of events remains unlikely due to the high cost a move like that entails for both Turkey and the rebels. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to presume that minor violations may be the most probable trigger for Damascus' and Moscow's renewed appetite to eliminate all "terrorists" once more. After all, 'violations' of de-escalation zones under the pretext of provocations by the rebels are in no shortage in the regime's record. Assad himself has never relinquished his commitment to "liberate every inch of Syria."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the March 5th agreement rather merely buys some time for regrouping on both sides of the frontline. Yet, it should be born in mind that Russia has spent considerable political capital in achieving the ceasefire, and therefore, it may not be in a rush for new escalation. His firm support for the Syrian regime aside, Putin presumably wants to avoid putting Russia's 'friendship' with Turkey at risk. The recent visit of the Russian Minister of Defense in Damascus probably indicates Moscow's intention to keep the situation stabilized for a while.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, as additional pressing issues have risen, Damascus may also want to slow down its 'liberation' effort. Recent clashes with opposition members in Daraa and the growing unrest in Suwayda province both indicate the regime's struggle in achieving stability in considerable parts of the country. While Assad has concentrated the main bulk of his forces in Idlib, his regime's social control

capacities appear to be shaky. Subsequently, the goal of achieving overall stability remains far from achieved.<sup>6</sup> The dramatic deterioration of the economy constitutes yet another cause for concern. The ongoing economic crisis in Lebanon has nearly taken out Syria's most valuable source of access to hard currency: the Lebanese banks. That caused a sharp depreciation of the Syrian currency against the Dollar, with the exchange rate exceeding 1.100:1. The regime has reacted by banning the use of foreign currencies, further subsidizing basic commodities, and undertaking an effort to formalize and strengthen the domestic banking sector. Yet, these measures are rather suppressive. They will probably do little to alleviate the macroeconomic pressures in the country, and subsequently Syrians' disenchantment, more than 80% of which live below the poverty line.<sup>7</sup> What is more, the spread of the new coronavirus in conjunction with a perilous economy, create an explosive mix. After years of war, Syria's health system is nearly obliterated, particularly since health facilities represented a prime target of the regime's bombing campaigns in the rebel territories. Damascus certainly lacks the financial and material means to deal with a potential severe outbreak of the virus. On top of that, an amnesty, presumably granted to alleviate the overcrowded prisons in light of the coronavirus' spread, may create further security concerns for the regime.<sup>8</sup> In this general context, an ever-deteriorating economy, relatively weak social control, the danger of a pandemic, and potentially increased surveillance needs, all constitute a critical juncture during which the regime's attention will probably shift away from Idlib, putting the conflict temporarily on hold.

While the frontlines at the Syrian north have been somewhat stabilized due to the above-mentioned events and factors, Iranian and Israeli activity and the competition between them within the Syrian theatre continues at a regular frequency.

The assassination of Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani by the US in Iraq was undoubtedly a severe hit to Iran's presence, strategic design, and prestige in the wider region and Syria in particular. Many experts considered him as the mastermind of his country's regional grand strategy and one of the few key figures that contributed to Bashar al-Assad's survival. Hence, the extent to which his loss will impact on Iran's regional strategies will probably be hard to assess in the short and mid-term. However, Iran's presence and influence in Syria should not be downplayed to a one-man's achievement that goes down with him. Iran's interests in the country are permanent, and so are the Lebanese Hezbollah's and the Syrian regime's dependence on Iran. Therefore, it is to be expected that the Iranian regime will try to maintain its presence in Syria, especially now that the assassination has been translated into a *casus belli* against the US and its allies in the region. The assumption of a more active role by other pro-Iran key figures, such as Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, to assist Soleimani's successor Brig. Gen. Esmail Ghaani to fill the void should not be ruled out.<sup>9</sup> The alleged participation of the Iran-backed Afghan Fatemiyoun Division in the latest Idlib offensive represents a telling example of Iran's reaction to the assassination. Given that it largely abstained from the Idlib front, Iran's renewed presence probably aims both at sending reassurances to its Syrian and Lebanese allies, as well as at reminding its enemies of its continuous relevance in the course of the Syrian conflict. More interestingly, if the reports about Ghaani's long experience and contacts in Afghanistan are accurate, the presence of the Fatemiyoun in Idlib may as well represent a more personal signal of Iran's new leadership in Syria. Also, Soleimani's successor recent visit to Aleppo, as reported by pro-regime media, if true, further underscores the aforementioned messages.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, to maintain a strategic regional presence, Iran needs to ensure that support for Hezbollah in Lebanon through armament-production factories in Syria and supply convoys remains unhindered. Israel, on its part, continues to implement a strategy of precision strikes on selected Iranian and Lebanese targets in Syria, combined with diplomatic pressure on Russia to restrain Iran. This strategy, as stated by Israeli officials, aims at leading Iran to the realization that its entrenchment in Syria is unsustainable. Yet, forcing Iran entirely out of Syria would require an extensive escalation on strikes. That could level the risk of direct confrontation, let alone that the expected outcome would remain highly unlikely.<sup>11</sup> What the Israeli strategy has indeed succeeded though, is to force Iran to constantly maneuver and occasionally decrease its activities. By transferring its operations all the more towards central and

northern Syria, where Israel may find it more difficult to strike due to increased Russian presence in the sky, Iran demonstrated remarkable adaptability in pursuing the security of its assets. This, however, does not mean that Israel is incapable or unwilling to upkeep its deterrence. Israeli airstrikes do take place also deep into Syrian territory; a fact that has reportedly forced Iran to consider creating underground installations to store or manufacture its alleged weaponry. In any case, though, both countries seem averse to further confrontation, in what Yaakov Lappin has accurately described as a “cat-and-mouse” game.<sup>12</sup> This gives the impression that for the time being, their competition will evolve around pragmatic strategies of attrition and re-entrenchment respectively, rather than escalation towards a swift zero-sum game.

In a nutshell, given his advantageous position in the battlefield, the steady Russian and Iranian support, and Turkey’s seeming inability to flip the table in its favor, Assad will probably emerge victorious in the final phase of the war when it takes place. As serious issues arise in the economic, public health, and social control fields though, the regime has little -if no room at all- to rest on its laurels. The opposition on its part, united or not, will probably face -sooner or later- critical dilemmas regarding its course of action; namely fighting to the end or negotiating for capitulation with whatever that entails for its representation on the post-war negotiation table. And while the future will tell how the next phase of the conflict evolves, the big loser will probably once again be the civilian population, trapped in the middle of either a brutal final battle or a ‘political process’ in which it plays little if no role at all. Assad will emerge as the King of the ruins, completely dependent on his foreign sponsors and with his control over large parts of the country stretching particularly thin. In any case, irrespective of the civil war’s end, Syria will continue to be the theatre of Israeli-Iranian competition in the short and mid-term. Yet the intensity of that competition will depend on several factors such as the extent of the future Iranian entrenchment, the Israeli strategic risk assessments, and the role that Russia may be willing to play from its de facto place of ‘dominance’ in the country. All in all, while the war in Syria may near its end, peace and stability remain a bridge too far.

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