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THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

A NEW STAGE, BUT IS IT THE FINAL ONE?

ROBERT S. FORD

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The Middle East Institute
1319 18th Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20036



SUMMARY

Eight years on, the Syrian civil war is finally winding down. The government of Bashar al-Assad has largely won, but the cost has been steep. The economy is shattered, there are more than 5 million Syrian refugees abroad, and the government lacks the resources to rebuild. Any chance that the Syrian opposition could compel the regime to negotiate a national unity government that limited or ended Assad's role collapsed with the entry of the Russian military in mid-2015 and the Obama administration's decision not to counter-escalate. The country remains divided into three zones, each in the hands of a different group and supported by foreign forces. The first, under government control with backing from Iran and Russia, encompasses much of the country, and all of its major cities. The second, in the east, is in the hands of a Kurdish-Arab force backed by the U.S. The third, in the northwest, is under Turkish control, with a mix of opposition forces dominated by Islamic extremists. The Syrian government will not accept partition and is ultimately likely to reassert its control in the eastern and northwestern zones.

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian civil war is winding down, and President Bashar al-Assad's government has largely won. Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has extolled the capture of the final portion of ISIS-controlled territory in southeastern Syria by American special forces with their Arab-Kurdish allies, in March 2019. The downfall of ISIS in eastern Syria did not, however, resolve the broader Syrian conflict.

The patchwork of control that predominated for the first part of the conflict now has consolidated to three zones. In the first, Assad's government, bolstered by vital aid from Iran and Russia, controls most of the country and its key population centers in western Syria. It aims to reassert its authority over the two remaining portions of the country still controlled by opposition forces operating with foreign military backing. In northwestern Syria, Turkish troops oversee uneasy ceasefires between opposition forces dominated by Islamic extremists and the Syrian government. It is likely that Syrian forces (with Russian help) will launch an operation to regain control of this opposition-held pocket of Idlib in northwestern Syria, causing yet more refugee suffering.

In eastern Syria, a reduced American ground force, backed by an American no-fly zone, enables a mixed Kurdish-Arab group to administer territories captured

from ISIS. The pending American withdrawal, initially announced by President Donald Trump at the end of 2018, has forced the Syrian Kurdish leadership to negotiate with the Assad government about the redeployment of Syrian forces in eastern Syria after U.S. forces depart. After the eventual American withdrawal, the Syrian government will begin to reassert control there as well, working in uneasy conjunction with the Syrian Kurdish and local Arab militias that helped the Americans fight ISIS.

The Syrian government and its allies will not accept partition of the country and will continue pushing to reassert central government control over the zones now in Turkish and American hands. Final resolution of the Syrian conflict will require negotiations over the future of those zones. These negotiations will cover the terms under which the Syrian government reasserts its authority and will involve Russia, Turkey, the Syrian government, and Syrian armed opposition groups. This process could take years. In the meantime, there will be intermittent fighting and violence, albeit at a far more limited scale and scope than what Syria experienced in the first years of the war. While the Damascus government is within reach of recapturing all pre-uprising Syrian territories, it lacks resources to rebuild the shattered economy. For many years ahead the country will face the enormous challenge of rebuilding, aggravated by Western sanctions and

MAP OF SYRIA



Map of Syria (Earthstar Geographics | Esri, HERE, Garmin)

TIMELINE

2011

- March** Anti-government protests begin in Daraa and violence soon escalates
- July** Founding of the Free Syrian Army and beginning of armed rebellion

2012

- April-May** Failure of the Annan peace plan, escalation into full-fledged civil war

2014

- June** ISIS declares caliphate in Iraq and Syria

2015

- September** Russia carries out first air strikes in support of the regime

2016

- December** Fall of rebel-held Aleppo to regime forces

2017

- October** ISIS loses Raqqa in battle against the Syrian Democratic Forces

2018

- December** Trump announces withdrawal of US troops from Syria

2019

- March** Destruction of ISIS's territorial caliphate, fall of Barghout

a scarcity of funding for reconstruction, as well as occasional extremist attacks. As a result, most of the 5 million Syrian refugees will have little incentive to return home, and Syria will remain a weakened state.

BEGINNING OF THE CONFLICT, 2011-14

Encouraged by the success of popular protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt, hundreds of thousands of Syrians began demonstrating across their country in March 2011, demanding an end to abuses among the security forces and government corruption. Apart from a few instances of violence, the majority of protests were peaceful. The Syrian government quickly responded with arrests and shootings, resulting in an escalation of violence.

While the draconian response to the protests that started in Daraa in 2011 was the spark that ignited the conflict, other factors also contributed to the country's descent into civil war. The contagion effects of the Arab Spring revolts in Tunisia and Egypt were the proximate cause of the Syrian civil war. Discontent about the government's response to the drought that beset Syria from 2006-10 was an underlying cause as well. This manifested in protests in shantytowns outside Damascus and other cities in the spring and summer of 2011. Poor economic circumstances among climate refugees in shantytowns around big cities made protests more likely.

By autumn 2011, insurgents had seized whole neighborhoods of several towns and cities. The Syrian government further

escalated with tanks, artillery, and aircraft. The fighting spread to encompass nearly the entirety of the country in the ensuing months. The nature of the conflict changed as well, becoming a battle not only for accountability but for absolute power. The fight also became markedly more sectarian with a growing presence of Sunni extremists fighting alongside the more moderate elements of the opposition. After initial gains in 2012, the armed opposition, short of supplies and money, lost momentum and a stalemate ensued. Shifts in control of territories between the armed opposition and the Syrian government were marginal between 2013 and 2015.

Western governments, shocked at the scale of bloodshed and fearful of growing extremist elements in the Syrian opposition, urged negotiation of a transitional national unity government. Along with Turkey and a few Gulf states, they provided limited material aid to client groups among the armed opposition in order to press the Assad government to come to the negotiating table. Meanwhile, Iran mobilized tens of thousands of foreign Shi'a militiamen to fight on behalf of the Assad government. In 2015, the Russian air force began flying combat air support missions to help President Assad's fragile forces.

The Western mantra starting in 2011 that there was no military solution to the Syrian conflict was wrong, as it only made sense if one side's escalation in the war was matched by escalation on the other side. The Americans and allies opposed to Assad declined to match the Iranian and Russian escalations and the military balance steadily

shifted in favor of the Assad government. The American strategy of resolving the Syrian conflict through negotiations without applying some kind of persuasive military pressure on Damascus failed badly. Instead, the Assad government, with help from militia forces mobilized by Iranian and Russian air support, gradually recaptured all of western Syria through punishing military assaults against weakened armed opposition groups. Washington didn't care; in late 2014, American attention had shifted away from a transition government in Damascus to ISIS, which had seized control of all of eastern Syria and western Iraq.

DYNAMICS OF THE WAR, 2015-18

THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT IN WESTERN SYRIA

The Syrian government has been the main protagonist since the beginning of the conflict. It has enjoyed a relatively unified command structure and still to this day functions as a state, although the long fight has weakened it substantially. President Assad has had steady support from his military and the government's four capable, ruthless intelligence services. The Syrian presidency insists on controlling all major institutions and rejects power sharing with the opposition or any effort to impose change or reform from the outside. It has never wavered from its goal of recapturing, gradually, all of the opposition-controlled territories.

The Syrian government depends heavily on help from its allies and has signaled that Russian and Iranian forces will remain in Syria over the long term. Damascus retains some agency; it has occasionally, gingerly, resisted Russian pressure to be more forthcoming on humanitarian aid deliveries and confidence-building measures. It has also publicly rebuked Iran for taking too much credit for battlefield successes. The government is strong enough on the battlefield that the opposition cannot remove it, but its manpower resources are exhausted and its finances in tatters. The government's desperate search for more fighting men empowered local warlords who, while nominally loyal to Damascus, led commanders and fighters who were little more than irregulars exploiting neighborhoods they control for money and plunder.

The Syrian government war machine has largely prevailed in western and southern Syria with Russian and Iranian help. Damascus, with Moscow's backing, has concluded many local "reconciliation" deals that were, in fact, rebel surrenders. The government's hold on the major population centers of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, and Daraa are secure. The Assad government has also taken steps to normalize its relations with other Arab states and to implement limited rebuilding initiatives with the help of foreign allies and the Syrian business community, which is connected financially and sometimes by family ties to the Syrian political and security elite. The government has evinced little interest in promoting rapid return of the

estimated 5 million Syrian refugees and instead has appropriated land for redevelopment by loyal businessmen.

Resolving the Syrian civil war involves not just the Syrian government's terms for the opposition, but also necessarily involves foreign state interests given the heavy intervention by regional and international powers, and consequent militarization of the country.

IRAN

Assad's key partner is not Russia but rather Iran, which has provided most of the manpower that has enabled Assad to keep fighting. In 2013 when Assad's hold on power was weakening, Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah's critical intervention turned the tide in Homs Province. In 2014-15 Iran's al-Quds Force, the foreign and clandestine wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), led by General Qassem Soleimani, mobilized fighters from Iraqi Shi'a militant groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah to fight in Syria. It also organized Afghans and Pakistanis into the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zainebiyoun brigades, which it sent to Syria. These groups

provided decisive manpower in many of the battles the Syrian government won between 2015 and 2018. Outside analysts estimated that Iran provided as many as 80,000 foreign Shi'a fighters to support Assad.¹ These Iranian-backed foreign Shi'a militias, under IRGC command, are deeply embedded into the broader Syrian security force order of battle and command network.²

Iran's principle goal is to ensure the survival of the Assad government, which in turn provides strategic depth to Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian-backed "resistance front" against Israel. (This front seeks to deter Israel from carrying out a direct attack against Iran, and the confrontation with Israel gives Iran and its allies at least a nominal claim to regional leadership.) The Iranian government has repeatedly asserted that forces under its command will remain in Syria, while denouncing the presence of American forces in eastern Syria as well as American support for the People's Protection Units (YPG) militia and local Arab fighters. Iran's material losses have not been great, as Iraqi, Lebanese, Afghan, and Pakistani fighters bore the brunt of losses under Iranian command. Iran's difficult economic circumstances, notably



Turkish President Erdogan, Russian President Putin, and Iranian President Rouhani ahead of the Turkey-Russia-Iran Tripartite summit on April 4, 2018. (TOLGA BOZOGLU/AFP/Getty Images)

oil export revenue cuts, are starting to hinder its activities in Syria, but the Iranian government is firmly committed to a long-term presence there.

RUSSIA

Syria in 2012 was Russia's last Arab ally, and President Vladimir Putin has provided material assistance since the start of the uprising in part to forestall the loss of the friendly Assad government. His dispatch of several dozen warplanes, their steady combat air support missions for the Syrian ground forces, and the establishment of a sort of no-fly zone over western Syria were instrumental in turning the tide in Assad's favor in 2016.

Putin also has a broader message to Western countries through his involvement in the Syrian conflict: Moscow rejects foreign states intervening against autocratic governments on behalf of domestic opposition movements. In a sense, Putin drew a red line in Syria against Western support for domestic opposition movements in countries that might one day include Russia. Putin has not wavered in pursuing a result to the war that leaves the Assad government in power and in some manner sovereign. Notably, the Russians have stressed that foreign forces (with the exception of the Russians) should eventually withdraw from Syria.

Sensitive to potential domestic backlash against his Syrian war effort, Putin deploys Russian air units while limiting the use of ground forces to a few special operations units and Russian mercenaries that fight on Assad's side. The overall Russian effort has been relatively low cost to Moscow. The Russians, meanwhile, maintain steady diplomatic contacts with all the foreign states involved in the Syrian conflict, including Turkey, Israel, and of course Iran, and thus are well-positioned to lead diplomatic efforts to contain and eventually resolve the civil war. Moscow organized a contact group with Iran and Turkey, called the Astana group, to pursue a reduction in fighting on the ground. (This ultimately gave an advantage to the Assad government.) The Russians now seek to use the Astana group to sponsor, with the UN, a political resolution of the civil war. Notably, Russian leverage with the Syrian government is stronger when Assad has to face not just fragmented opposition groups on the battlefield but also Turkish or American troops that Syrian forces alone cannot defeat in a conventional battle.

TURKISH-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES IN NORTHERN SYRIA

Ankara initially was determined to see the Assad government removed and its allies in the political and armed opposition, including groups connected to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, prevail in the civil war. However, since 2015, when the Russian air

force intervened to boost Assad, and the United States ramped up the fight against ISIS in the northeast using the Kurdish YPG as its tip of the spear, Turkey's key objective has shifted to forestalling the establishment of a Syrian Kurdish entity in northern Syria. The American insistence on working against ISIS with the Syrian Kurdish YPG, despite its immediate ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey (see below), forced Ankara to find accommodation with Russia. Turkey succeeded in gaining Russian acceptance of limited Turkish intervention in northern Syria to block Democratic Union Party (PYD)/YPG expansion toward the Mediterranean.

The hundreds of Turkish troops deployed in Idlib Province in northwestern Syria and in the smaller Afrin zone in north-central Syria have two missions. First, with help from Syrian allies (see below), they have halted expansion of Syrian Kurdish control in northern Syria. Ankara, already burdened by the costs of 3.5 million Syrian refugees, also wants its forces to deter Syrian government attacks on Idlib that would instigate a new rush of refugees to the Turkish border. Therefore, Ankara keeps trying to placate Moscow about reducing the scope of extremist activities in Idlib in order to deter a major Syrian-Russian attack. There have been frequent Syrian government air and artillery strikes on Idlib targets, but no large-scale attack yet. Moscow is trying, gradually, to build stronger ties with Ankara and has given the Turks a margin to maneuver. The Turkish position is vulnerable: The country wants neither a new refugee surge nor an

armed confrontation with Russian forces, especially when its relations with the United States are so strained.

SYRIAN NON-JIHADI OPPOSITION

The non-jihadi armed opposition arose in 2011 from soldiers and officers who defected and coordinated with the street protesters to hinder government attacks on demonstrations. The Syrian opposition was always split between secularists and Islamists; there was never an agreed vision of the future state. The Islamist spectrum of the armed opposition was further split between religiously conservative groups that would accept negotiation with the Syrian government and jihadi groups who reject any negotiation and insist on fighting to stand up an Islamic state of some kind. The opposition failed to entice key segments of the Syrian government's support base and most external aid to it diminished sharply by 2017. Most of the non-jihadi armed groups now operate under Turkish military protection in either the northwestern province of Idlib or in the Afrin zone just to the east. These groups have loosely amalgamated into the National Liberation Front. The Front is heavily dependent on Turkish aid and functions essentially as Turkish army proxies, regularly fighting Syrian Kurdish groups rather than the Syrian government. These non-jihadis occasionally spar with jihadi fighters in Idlib, but they have lost all major battles against the jihadis. Their weakness on the ground has been a major

hindrance to Turkey's ability to placate the Russians and forestall a major assault on Idlib.

SYRIAN JIHADI OPPOSITION

The most important jihadi opposition group still controlling territory is the Organization to Liberate the Levant (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or HTS). HTS is the strongest Syrian military force in Idlib and operates adjacent to Turkish military observers and the National Liberation Front. HTS evolved from the Nusra Front, itself an offshoot of the Islamic State in Iraq. HTS has proven far more agile politically than its Iraqi forbearer. It has often made tactical alliances with non-jihadi organizations, breaking them when needed. In large parts of Idlib it now operates an administration, managing schools, government offices, and utilities. HTS claims to have broken all ties with al-Qaeda, but the U.S. government rejected its claims and has classified it as a terrorist organization. HTS since 2013 has controlled key border crossings in Idlib going into Turkey, and it has generated steady revenue streams from taxes on incoming trucks. Its fighters are motivated and experienced, and its leadership is tactically astute. The Syrian government would like to reassert authority over Idlib, but it won't be able to defeat HTS fighters easily without Russian air support. Idlib's future depends mainly on Russian-Turkish negotiations about a bilateral relationship which would extend well beyond issues relating to Idlib itself. HTS's continued control of large portions of

Idlib will remain a potential flashpoint until there is a broader deal involving Turkey, Russia, and the Syrian government.

AMERICAN-CONTROLLED EASTERN SYRIA

Since 2011 Washington's focus has shifted from helping to create a transitional government in Syria to eliminating ISIS. By early 2019, the U.S. position had evolved into protecting its proxies in eastern Syria, containing Iranian influence in Syria, and strangling the Assad government economically. President Trump, anxious to declare victory and end major commitments in Syria, insisted to a reluctant Pentagon and State Department that most U.S. forces withdraw from the country. Some hundreds will remain indefinitely along with a U.S. no-fly zone east of the Euphrates River. Ostensibly this military operation focuses on preventing a resurgence of ISIS. In reality, it aims to protect the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG as it entrenches local governance institutions. The Americans have negotiated, so far without success, for the Turks and the YPG militia to accept some kind of security zone along the border between Turkey and northeastern Syria. The Americans also hold a pocket of desert inside Syria at Tanf, near the junction of the Syrian-Jordanian-Iraqi borders where they block Iranian access to a road coming out of Iraq.



Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) members attend a funeral for an Arab SDF fighter killed in the eastern Deir ez-Zor Province in April 2019. (DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images)

The American position has its vulnerabilities. As ISIS no longer controls any territory in Syria, the legal justification under the UN Charter for the American military presence is more problematic. Eastern Syria is not economically viable, and the Trump administration does not want to enter into long-term economic aid arrangements. It has filled the gap with Gulf-state financing, but as Assad's military gains gradually translate into normalization with other Arab countries, that external aid will become problematic. Meanwhile, the Americans have not been able to translate success at combatting ISIS and controlling eastern Syria into political concessions from Assad that would protect Syrian Kurdish autonomy. Instead, the Americans are largely shut out of the key talks about political reforms that include the UN, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Washington is reduced to urging its PYD/YPG allies not cut a separate deal with the Assad government. Damascus, in fact, could make some short-term concessions to the PYD/YPG about autonomy to convince them to demand the Americans withdraw their remaining forces. Such a call would make any continued American presence east of the Euphrates River impossible. The Americans also must confront tougher security

conditions over time; the longer they remain in eastern Syria, the more time hostile intelligence services and extremists will have to discover security vulnerabilities. The January 2019 suicide bombing in Manbij, a city supposedly pacified, that killed four Americans is indicative of what the U.S. will face moving ahead.

THE PYD/YPG

The Syrian Kurdish leftist political party, the PYD, has dominated eastern Syria since 2013, backed by its organized and seasoned militia, the YPG. After the Americans intervened to help the YPG against ISIS, Washington insisted that some Arab tribal elements join the YPG fighters to create the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which shouldered the bulk of the fighting against ISIS in eastern Syria. The PYD/YPG were always the backbone of the SDF. They are not particularly democratic; they harassed political opponents and imposed their vision of populist governance in the northeastern quarter of Syria, which they now call the Federation of Northern Syria (or Rojava). Under PYD tutelage there are local administrations governing all of eastern Syria, including Arab-majority areas like Raqqa.

The PYD/YPG has organic links to the Turkish PKK, which both Turkey and the United States consider a terrorist group. Notably, the commander of the SDF, Shahin Cilo, aka General Mazlum, is a YPG fighter with connections to the PKK. Turkey consistently has urged the U.S. to distance itself from the PYD/YPG, and the Turkish invasion of the Syrian Kurdish city of Afrin in January 2018 demonstrated the PYD/YPG's vulnerability to the Turks. After much confusion in Washington about an American withdrawal from Syria in late 2018 and early 2019, the PYD/YPG are nervous about the long-term American commitment in eastern Syria that protects them from Turkey. The PYD therefore carefully maintains ties and contacts with Russia and the Assad government even though it has not been able to secure concessions from Damascus about local autonomy.

FAILED NEGOTIATIONS

Civil wars can end either by the total victory of one side over the other or through a negotiated settlement. The Syrian government cannot directly confront Turkey or the U.S. to reassert its authority in northern and eastern Syria. Regaining some kind of Syrian central government control in the near term would require successful negotiations that secure Turkish and American consent to end their occupation of Syrian territories in return for Syrian concessions about local governance and safety for leaders of the Turkish and American proxy groups. Reaching a deal may be impossible.

Each previous effort at launching talks between the Syrian political and armed opposition and the Syrian government collapsed due to the latter's rejection of any compromise on power sharing or even confidence-building measures such as prisoner releases and humanitarian aid access.

GETTING TO FAILURE IN GENEVA, 2012-14

The foreign governments backing the Syrian opposition did not seek immediate regime change in Syria. When President Barack Obama said that Assad should step aside on August 18, 2011, he emphasized that the U.S. would not impose a transition on Syria and would instead leave to the Syrian people the choice of their leaders. The Obama administration did not want to intervene too heavily in Syria in 2012-14; it did not want to "own" the conflict. The administration's policy was to cut entanglements in the Middle East, not add to them. Thus, Washington aimed at securing some kind of negotiated settlement, ideally under the auspices of the UN, and pushed its allies into at least formally acquiescing to that goal.

The Geneva 1 communiqué that they all agreed to with the UN and the Security Council on June 30, 2012 called for a ceasefire and negotiation between the Assad government and the opposition for a transition government.

It took the Americans and their allies more than a year and a half to herd the main factions of the political and

armed opposition to the negotiating table in Geneva in January 2014; only direct intervention from Turkey and Qatar that month brought about the informal acquiescence of hardline, but non-jihadi Islamist rebel groups to the Geneva talks. Although the opposition delegation offered in writing to the UN to negotiate each position in a transition government, including the status of President Assad, the Syrian government rejected any political discussion and the talks quickly foundered. The Assad government's military position in early 2014 was relatively stable and the Russian government pointedly declined to put any pressure on it to negotiate political compromises. The disunity within the Syrian armed opposition due to leadership conflicts and arguments about the allocation of supplies ensured that military pressure on the Assad government was slow to build.

MORE FIGHTING, MORE FAILED TALKS, 2014-17

The war of attrition between the foreign-backed armed opposition and the Syrian government, supported by Iran and, to a lesser extent, Russia, ground along. By the spring of 2015, however, Syrian government losses had accumulated to the point that President Assad acknowledged publicly that his army had to begin retreating. But it was the Iranians who made the entreaty for Moscow to directly enter the fray. Iranian General Soleimani, head of the al-Quds Force, flew to Moscow to convince President Putin to send in Russian forces lest the Assad government collapse.³

The subsequent deployment of Russian aircraft and more special operations forces stabilized the fighting, reversing the trend of a weakening Syrian military position.

Another round of Geneva peace talks in 2016 stalled as the Syrian government again rejected any political discussions, believing that with Russian and Iranian help it could secure more on the battlefield than at the negotiating table. Moreover, by this time, the American focus had shifted away from pressuring Assad to negotiate. Obama was more concerned about fighting ISIS in eastern Syria and rejected responding to the Russian escalation in western Syria. While the Russians pounded the anti-Assad opposition in western Syria, the Americans pounded ISIS in eastern Syria. Russia, with UN and American backing, called for ceasefire zones in western Syria. The more moderate armed opposition elements, their backs to the wall, accepted the zones, but the Syrian government with varying degrees of help from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah attacked and captured three of the four zones, one by one in 2016-18. As of early 2019, only the last zone, in Idlib, remained in opposition hands.

As its enemies' strength in western and eastern Syria receded, the Syrian government had little incentive to compromise at UN talks. The UN special envoy, Staffan de Mistura, was able to convene two more rounds of talks in 2017 but these made no notable progress. De Mistura in December 2017 publicly blamed the Syrian government for refusing to



Former United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura (C) at a meeting with foreign ministers of Russia, Iran, and Turkey to discuss the Syrian peace process. (Alexander Shcherbak/TASS via Getty Images)

negotiate with the opposition and urged Russia to put pressure on Assad to make some concessions.

LOST OPPORTUNITY

The ill-coordinated manner in which foreign state backers funneled aid to armed opposition groups—in particular the Turkish-Qatari aid to Islamist extremist armed groups—prevented the Syrian opposition from coalescing into a united front.⁴ Some analysts argue that the American strategy of achieving a negotiated settlement through a UN process combined with limited military pressure was mistaken from the beginning.⁵ They assert that the Assad government could never have accepted reforms or subsequent calls for a genuine transitional, national unity government

from elements of the Syrian opposition and their foreign backers. These analysts note that any genuine power sharing would be completely anathema to Assad and the leaders of his security apparatus. They also argue that while Assad was, in fact, losing in the war of attrition between 2013 and 2015, the Iranians and the Russians would never have allowed his government to collapse. The American intervention, and that of the other pro-opposition foreign states, they conclude, merely forestalled Assad's victory and thus prolonged the war. They do not, however, address the splits within the Syrian government leadership that more pressure would have produced. For example, a bombing in 2012 killed several top Syrian government officials in an operation most believe was an inside job. Meanwhile, Moscow and Tehran would have faced challenges managing the political

sensitivities from greater casualties and costs. Their ability to escalate indefinitely in the face of increased rebel strength was unclear, and it would have been further at risk politically if the armed opposition had pushed to win over elements of the Syrian government's support base in return for greater external support.

NO NEGOTIATED POLITICAL DEAL IN PROSPECT, 2017-18

The shift in the military balance between 2017 and 2018 removed any remaining incentive for the Assad government to make compromises in a political negotiation. As such, a national deal under UN auspices is very unlikely. Russian and Iranian officials warned that the opposition would not gain a political victory at the UN negotiating table that eluded it on the battlefield. The dogged UN envoy De Mistura dropped any further discussion of a transition government and instead sought to convene talks between the Syrian government and parts of the Syrian opposition about changes to the constitution. This effort, too, faltered in 2018 and saw De Mistura resign in October, replaced by Norwegian diplomat Geir Pedersen later that month. Absent any considerable countervailing pressure, the Assad government at most might accept a few cosmetic changes to the constitution and perhaps a few small changes in the cabinet. Constitutional changes mean little when the Syrian government has never been subject to the rule of law and is unrepentant now. The weak Syrian political opposition negotiating team

working with the UN has little incentive to accept a watered-down national deal. Meanwhile, HTS has never evinced any interest in a negotiated settlement. Russia, Iran, and the Syrian government insist that these jihadi elements cannot be included in any political deal and must instead be destroyed. Therefore, a national political deal under UN auspices or some other mechanism that dramatically stops the remaining fighting, is unlikely. There will be no Appomattox moment that concludes the Syrian civil war.

BRINGING THE CONFLICT TO A CLOSE

The balance of power in western Syria, where the capital and all major cities are located, strongly favors the Assad government. The Turkish- and American-controlled enclaves are relatively isolated and each suffers vulnerabilities. Assad has no need to speed along negotiations with the Turkish and American client groups; he can wait. Any near-term political agreement between the Assad government and the remaining Syrian opposition will be largely on Assad's terms. Only long-term force commitments from the Turks and the Americans would enable the remaining Syrian opposition in Idlib, Afrin, and eastern Syria to hold the Syrian government in check. Washington and Ankara sharply disagree about the proper local allies and most desirable outcomes in Syria, however. Thus, Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran hold an advantageous position as the war winds down.

ENDING FOREIGN TROOP DEPLOYMENTS IN SYRIA

Just as it eschews serious political compromise, the Syrian government and its backers reject long-term foreign occupation in northern and eastern Syria. As long as its hold on Damascus is firm, the Syrian government has no incentive to abstain from trying, with help from its allies, to eject the Turks and the Americans. While the Russians may decline to employ their air force against either the Turks or the Americans, Moscow will not legitimize the long-term presence of the Americans and Turks on Syrian soil either. Instead, it is more likely that Russia will protect Assad's hold on western Syria while pressing for a series of separate negotiations to enable Syrian forces to redeploy into the Turkish and American zones.

One set of negotiations would aim to convince Turkey to withdraw its small military units from Idlib and Afrin and allow reestablishment of formal Syrian government control over these areas and the borders. The Russians and Syrian government will insist that HTS be destroyed. The status of the non-jihadi National Liberation Front and Turkish-backed civil administrations would be subject to negotiation. The Assad government might promise to reconcile with them, but the history of such agreements suggests that over time the Assad government reasserts full authority as it gathers strength and peels

away opponents on the ground. The Turks, Russians, and Syrians would have to agree on intermediate-term arrangements for the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkish-controlled zones of northern Syria, as well as for the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey itself.

Eastern Syria is an entirely different challenge for the Syrian government. The Euphrates River has been an informal dividing line between, on the one hand, the forces of Syria and its Russian and Iranian allies, and, on the other, U.S. forces and their anti-ISIS Kurdish YPG allies (nominally part of the SDF). Damascus and its allies sent military probes east of the river several times in 2018, and they might try to carry out more raids into PYD/YPG- and SDF-controlled eastern Syria in 2019. The Syrian government can't confront the American military directly. Instead, to rid Syria of American forces, the Russians likely will push for another round of negotiations involving Russia, the Syrian government, and the PYD/YPG about the PYD/YPG- and SDF-controlled territories. Again, the Syrian-Russian goal would be the formal reestablishment of Damascus' control. As the PYD/YPG-controlled territories have newly established local and provincial administrative bodies, negotiations over the status of administration of the territories, as well as the disposition of the YPG and SDF fighters, will be difficult and prolonged. The Syrian government is tactically clever enough to conclude a deal with the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG about local autonomy. It knows that with the passage of time it could reimpose its authority fully as it

regathers strength. Arab ethnic chauvinism would play to its advantage. Talks between the PYD and the Assad government were inconclusive in 2018 but neither side wanted to close the channel completely.

The prospect of an American departure from eastern Syria would boost the chances of an agreement between the Syrian government and the PYD/YPG. The Americans might try to delay their withdrawal until Iranian forces also withdraw, but Damascus and Tehran have little incentive to accept such a deal. They more likely would wait out the Americans. The Assad government, with Iranian backing and probably Turkish and Russian support as well, would likely use non-conventional tactics to harass American and SDF forces to weaken American resolve. Syrian intelligence is already operating throughout eastern Syria and will generate anti-foreign occupation fighters with money and arms to utilize car and roadside bombs, assassinations of local allies, ambushes, and small-scale indirect fire attacks, hoping to cause casualties and undermine American domestic political support for a prolonged American presence in Syria. These locally generated hostile forces could even include Islamist extremists, a tactic the Syrian government used against the Americans in Iraq in 2004-09. Such asymmetrical tactics would impose fewer manpower costs on the tired communities that support Assad's government. It is not clear that the Trump administration has the patience to withstand occasional casualties and long, drawn-out talks over the future of eastern Syria. It has announced no particular strategy

to compel Syrian and Iranian concessions beyond harsh economic sanctions. As neither the Syrian nor Iranian government's top interest involves their populations' economic welfare, how sanctions would compel concessions in any foreseeable timeframe is an open question.

ISRAEL

Israel will also have a role in diminishing the violence in Syria because of its insistence on rooting out Iranian forces from Syrian soil. Israel took a relatively circumspect stance toward the Syrian civil war until 2017. It provided small-scale assistance to a few opposition elements near the Israeli border but limited its intervention. The buildup of pro-Iranian militias and IRGC al-Quds Force elements in Syria in 2016 and 2017 provoked alarm inside the Israeli government. In 2018, the Israelis launched a series of sharp, limited airstrikes against Iranian and Syrian targets. Anxious not to engage the Russian air force, which is also operating in western Syria, Jerusalem set up a deconfliction mechanism with Moscow to prevent any air combat. Israel followed up with a greater diplomatic push with the Russians in 2017 and 2018.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Moscow repeatedly, demanding primarily that Syria respect the 1974 ceasefire lines and confirm the demilitarized zone on the Golan. Second, Israel aims to secure Russian pressure to compel Iran to remove all of its military forces and associated militias Iran sent to fight in Syria. Jerusalem is particularly sensitive to Tehran's attempts to build up missile bases after the

pounding Israeli towns took from Iranian-supplied Hezbollah missiles launched from Lebanon in the 2006 war. Jerusalem also has encouraged Washington to take a tough line on the Iranian presence in Syria; the Israelis would be delighted to see American forces in eastern Syria tangle with nearby Iranian forces. President Trump in March 2019 noted the American presence at Tanf aims at impeding an Iranian build-up in Syria and thus helping address Israeli security concerns. This presence, however, is not stopping Iran from airlifting men and material to western Syria as it has done for the past 30 years. Iran is suffering economically and appears not to want a major confrontation with Israel in Syria. Nonetheless, the Israelis may keep pressing hard with airstrikes, with American backing. The Israeli-Iranian confrontation thus remains another potential flashpoint.

SUSTAINED EXTREMIST PRESENCE

While ISIS lost its remaining territories in 2019, it continues to operate as an insurgent group able to strike in both western and eastern Syria. In 2018, Syrian government forces faced regular attacks along the western bank of the Euphrates River in Deir ez-Zor Province, and there were occasional attacks farther west in Homs and Suwayda provinces. Similarly, in 2018 and 2019 there were regular ambushes of SDF fighters on the eastern side of the Euphrates River. While these attacks threaten neither Syrian government control over its territories, nor that of the SDF in the east, this extremist

violence will, however, impede whatever stabilization and reconstruction efforts move ahead.

RECONSTRUCTION STALLED, REFUGEES STRANDED

Around half of Syria's pre-war population was displaced during the fighting between 2012 and 2017.⁶ Disruptions resulting from the war have cost the economy some \$226 billion, according to an April 2018 estimate from the World Bank.⁷ In 2016, the economy was half the size of what it was five years earlier, before the war. The Syrian government estimated it will cost between \$200 billion and \$400 billion to rebuild the economy, far beyond the means of Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran.⁸ As such, Damascus will constantly use the cost of reintegrating refugees as a justification to demand more assistance from Turkey, the Gulf states, and the West. The Trump administration and the U.S. Congress have repeatedly stated, however, that the American government will not help until there is genuine movement on political reform inside Syria. Instead, the U.S. tightened sanctions on the Syrian government and its Iranian ally, helping trigger a serious fuel shortage during the winter of 2018-19. The European Union (EU), meanwhile, also withheld reconstruction assistance in favor of extracting political reforms from the Assad government, soon confronting pressure from Moscow starting in 2018 to reverse its position.⁹



Syrian refugees at the Al Marj refugee camp in Marj, Lebanon. (Marwan Naamani/picture alliance via Getty Images)

Even under the best of financial circumstances, the Syrian government's planning and work with Western agencies is cumbersome and slow. The Syrian economy, therefore, is unlikely to regain much vigor even as the fighting diminishes. With unemployment for young people estimated at 78 percent in 2015, and infrastructure severely lacking in many cities, few refugees have much to return to.¹⁰ (They would also face security risks in many cases.) How best to aid the huge Syrian refugee communities in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey will be a major challenge for the international community for years to come. Forestalling recruitment by extremist elements among dispirited refugee communities will be a related challenge as well. Furthermore, increasing resentment and hostility toward refugees

among host populations in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan will only aggravate the refugee problem.

CONCLUSION

As the Syrian conflict winds down, Syria will emerge as an economically broken state whose northern and eastern territories are occupied by foreign powers. The government, in control of the key parts of the country, is unrepentant. The Americans will eventually withdraw as eastern Syria is not strategically vital for American national security. The American public is ill-informed about what U.S. forces are doing in Syria and incidents that cause significant U.S. casualties will undermine support for the current policy. The U.S. should recognize that it cannot expel Iranian forces from Syria with the minimal resources Washington is

willing to devote to the task. Likewise, it is unlikely that America's Gulf allies will be able to use restored diplomatic relations and promises of investment to downgrade the Syrian government's relations with Iran. Moreover, the Americans and their Gulf and European allies will not be able to fix the economic, social, and political problems that drive extremist recruitment in Syria. The government will not allow independent economic and aid actors, while funding government entities ensnares donors into the web of government favoritism and corruption. The best that outside states can do to reduce Syrian suffering and diminish future extremist recruitment is to focus resources on the 5 million Syrian refugees whose living conditions often are precarious. In these camps and informal settlements, especially in Lebanon and Jordan, outside help can alleviate harsh conditions. It will also be important to ensure that extremists operating inside Syria cannot reach outside the country to strike America and its allies. This will require a new, more detailed level of security cooperation, particularly with Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon.

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Cover Photo: Syrian rebel fighters battle government forces near the village of Arafa in the central Hama Province, on November 20, 2017. (OMAR HAJ KADOUR/AFP/Getty Images)

Photo 2: Members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) attend the funeral of an Arab SDF fighter who was killed in the eastern Deir Ez-Zor Province on April 10, 2019. (DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amb. (ret.) Robert S. Ford is currently a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington where he writes about developments in the Levant and North Africa. Amb. Ford retired from the U.S. Foreign Service in 2014 after serving as the U.S. Ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014. In this role, Amb. Ford was the State Department lead on Syria, proposing and implementing policy and developing common strategies with

European and Middle Eastern allies to try to resolve the Syria conflict. Prior to this, Amb. Ford was the deputy U.S. Ambassador to Iraq from 2008 to 2010, and also served from 2006 until 2008 as the U.S. Ambassador to Algeria, where he boosted bilateral education and rule of law cooperation. Amb. Ford served as deputy chief of mission in Bahrain from 2001 until 2004, and political counselor to the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad from 2004 until 2006 during the tumultuous establishment of the new, permanent Iraqi government. In 2014 he received the Secretary's Service Award, the U.S. State Department's highest honor. He also received in April 2012 from the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston the annual Profile in Courage Award for his stout defense of human rights in Syria. He has appeared on CNN, PBS, Fox, MSNBC, NPR, the BBC and Arabic news networks as well as in *The New York Times* and *Foreign Policy*.

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