

A globe is the central focus, showing the continents of Africa and Europe. In the foreground, a large, light-colored wooden chess piece, possibly a king or queen, is partially visible on the left side. The background is a dark, slightly blurred blue.

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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

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A By-Product of the Arab Spring

Without doubt, the Syrian Civil War represents the most violent war in the world. Indicatively, by the end of 2015 the war had already cost over 300,000 dead – plus 7,500,000 internally displaced people and 4,000,000 refugees out of a total population of nearly 20 million (Boghani, 2016). The Syrian Civil War marks the end of the Arab Spring, a wave of popular uprisings in the Middle East against autocrats since December 2010 (Lynch, 2012), and the onset of the Arab Winter (Isreali, 2013).

But why? Because al-Assad, in stark contrast to other autocrats such as Qaddafi in Libya or Mubarak in Egypt who were overwhelmed by dissent (armed or non-armed) within just a few months, successfully resisted the challenges to his iron-fist rule and, as a consequence, the peaceful protests in mid-2011 were succeeded in early 2012 by an armed uprising by a disaffected Sunni majority against the ruling Alawite (Shia) minority. Unlike other wars in Libya and Yemen in the wake of the Arab Spring (Kronenfeld and Yoel Guzansky, 2014), the Syrian Civil War quickly developed into a peripheral crisis of a grand scale that engulfed Arab and non-Arab countries alike (Martini et al. 2013).

The US former general David Petraeus pointedly equated the Syrian Civil War with a “geopolitical Chernobyl spewing instability and extremism over the region and around the world” (Sales, 2015). The Syrian Civil War opened “Pandora’s Box”: not only did the war spill over to neighbouring countries (e.g. Lebanon) but also new threats (e.g. jihadist terrorism) spread like wildfire throughout the Middle East and Europe (Young et al., 2014). But why? And since this conflict has become a ticking bomb for regional peace and stability, why cannot it be terminated peacefully? Because the Syrian Civil War has been now transformed into a tangled web of several intra-state and inter-state conflicts.

A Proxy War

In short, the Syrian War has been transformed into a unique war by proxy waged at two levels at the very same time. At a micro level, the regional Sunni powers (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar) and the champion of Shia Islam, Iran, vie for supremacy in the Middle East and, in broader terms, for influence over the “umma” (the community of Muslim believers) (Bender, 2016). The pro-Assad camp includes the Shia in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (who tightly control the respective seats of government in the three Arab countries) and Iran and, quite predictably, aspires to defend the “Shia Axis” in the Middle East (Baghdad- Beirut-Damascus-Tehran) against all odds (Sullivan, 2014: 9-11; Mazis, 2016: Chapter 1).

The anti-Assad camp constitutes a rather heterogeneous faction which includes (apart from Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia) two former colonial powers with a centuries-old presence in the Middle East (Britain and France) and the world's only superpower with a decades-old sphere of influence in the Near East (the USA). The above countries agree on the "objective" (the downfall of Assad and the destruction of the "Shia Axis" in the Middle East) but disagree on the "method" – with some arguing in favour of an invasion (e.g. France) and some in favour of direct support to the armed opposition. Turkey, whose leader invested heavily in a quick victory of the armed opposition, repeatedly implored the USA to intervene in Syria in the pattern of Libya (Mazis, 2016: Chapter 1). According to award-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, Turkey went as far as to launch a "false flag operation" in Syria in August 2013 to drag the USA into the war after president Obama declared the use of weapons of mass destructions by al-Assad as a red line for the US government (Hersh, 2014).

The anti-Assad camp initially supported in various ways the Free Syrian Army –in effect an amalgam of numerous private armies with a strong presence of extreme islamists and even jihadists. However, the Free Syrian Army eventually proved an organisation susceptible to factionalism and partisanship – just like its political wing stationed in Turkey, the Syrian National Coalition. The champions of Sunni Islam (Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) soon threw their weight behind the jihadists who already outgunned and outnumbered the moderate factions within the FSA by 2014. However, the ultra-fanatism of the jihadists and their propensity towards mass violence (e.g. the genocide against Yazidi Kurds in Iraq) abhorred the USA and the West (Lister, 2014: 71-98).

At a macro level, the USA and Russia contend for power and influence in this geopolitically crucial region. The USA strives to preserve its sphere of influence in the Middle East in a rather odd way. On the one hand, the superpower committed itself steadfastly to the war against the jihadists (most notably, the Islamic State) in Syria and the neighbouring countries since late 2014. On the other hand, Washington refrains from armed intervention against al-Assad (in the pattern of the one against Qaddafi) lest the fall of the secular despot should open the gates of Damascus to the jihadists. However, the policy of president Obama frustrated the regional Sunni allies of the USA (most notably, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) which follow their own sectarian agenda – even against the very wishes of Washington. (Bossi, 2014: Chapter 4; Forsythe and Monshipouri, 2015: 1-10).

In contrast, Russia adopted a consistent policy since 2011 that aspires to achieve two inter-related objectives: first, extend its influence in the Middle East at the expense of the US sphere of influence and, secondly, exterminate the foreign jihadists (many of whom from Chechnya and the Caucasus) in Syria and defend the Caucasus and Russia from islamic extremism. Ergo Russia intervened militarily in support of al-Assad in September 2015 – despite the obvious challenges for Russia's first military operation outside the periphery of the former Soviet Union since 1989. Putin did not want to repeat the mistake with Libya when Qaddafi was overthrown in 2011 by NATO without a resolute

reaction by Russia. Putin, in effect, intends to upgrade Russia into an international actor of such power that the USA (and the West) will be compelled to seek terms with Moscow in Ukraine, Iran and elsewhere (Lund, 2015; Plakoudas, 2016: 34-40).

An Elusive Peace

Currently, the various factions in Syria are interlocked in a “bellum omnium contra omnes” (or a war of all against all): the Kurds, the Islamic State, the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Arab Army, Iran, the Iraqi Shia militias, other jihadists (e.g. Jabhat al-Nusra), the US-led international coalition, Turkey and Russia. At present, the Syrian War has degenerated into a sanguinary stalemate. How can the stalemate be overcome? Through a military victory or a peace settlement? Peace talks during intra-state irregular wars do occur; however, they rarely eventuate into a peace settlement – more so a viable one (Johnston, 2007: 559-557; Bernstein, 2012: 23-37). In fact, just 20% of such wars since 1945 have ended in peace – and just 10% in permanent peace and stability (Walter, 1997: 335-336; Byman, 2009: 125-137). Why do such conflicts display a success rate far less than that of conventional wars?

Because intra-state irregular conflicts amount, in essence, to civil wars of varying intensity (Galula, 1964: 4). And such wars usually produce high levels of enmity and, by extension, violence – especially against non-combatants (Kalyvas, 2006). The Syrian Civil War has elicited such levels of enmity that the casualties currently exceed other similar wars in the Middle East (e.g. Yemen or Libya). Unsurprisingly, peace talks amount to a luxury that belligerents cannot afford. Despite repeated peace initiatives by the international community (mainly the UN), the FSA and al-Assad agreed to a ceasefire only in February 2016 – which did not, however, include the PYD or the jihadists (e.g. ISIS). However, the two sides did not undertake any other initiative to consolidate a permanent peace; nor did they sincerely commit to the ceasefire as the repeated violations showed. Instead, the two sides merely bought time to focus on their top priorities elsewhere (e.g. Battle of Palmyra for al-Assad). The resumption of hostilities in May 2016 did not shock anyone inside or outside Syria (Abboud, 2016).

In September 2016, a new ceasefire was agreed upon which, nonetheless, collapsed within just 7 days after two provocations (i.e. the attack on the UN humanitarian convoy in Aleppo and the Al-Assad’s army base in Deir ez-Zor) (Gordon and Kramer, 2016). At present, peace talks between the FSA and al-Assad seem a rather remote possibility – especially after the Battle of Aleppo. By far the longest and fiercest battle in the Syrian Civil War, the victory of Assad in the Battle of Aleppo in December 2016 will most likely tilt the scales of war in favour of Assad (Hiro, 2016). Despite the obvious exhaustion of the regime after six years of war as the recent recapture of Palmyra by an ISIS’s blitzkrieg attack

in early December demonstrates, the strongman in Damascus will probably capitalise on the military momentum after the capture of Aleppo to secure the western (and most populous) half of the country. What about the other actors involved in the conflict? Moscow desires a peace settlement (at its own terms) to draw herself out of the quicksand of the Syrian Civil War. Ankara and Tehran, two regional players with which Moscow currently deliberates on the future of Syria, will not cease their armed interventions until they satisfy their own primary objectives – i.e. avert the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity in Syria and the downfall of the Shia Crescent in the Middle East respectively. And shown time and time again in modern history, external interventions tend to prolong intra-state wars (Berti, 2016).

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