

What next with Syria?

The bloody conflict in Syria has entered its seventh year. There are indications that it may be a significant year for a war that has already consumed hundreds of thousands of lives and has led the country to ruin. Unfortunately, the prospects of its end still seem distant. In the coming months Syrians may expect further consolidation of the major trends we have encountered in this conflict over the last couple of years. These include the survival of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad (after the breakdown the regime suffered in early 2015), with the gradual recovery of the areas of the country that had until recently been in the hands of the rebels or caliphate; the progressive weakening and disintegration of the armed opposition (along with its further ideological-religious radicalization); and the intensification of the active influence of regional and global powers on developments in the Levant with their direct military presence including the Syrian territory. Regardless of which of these trends will actually strengthen in the coming months, the Syrian conflict has become completely unpredictable and unmanageable.

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Syria war – status quo

The seventh year of the Syrian conflict in many respects resembles what has been happening for the last several months. It was a period characterized by extremely high dynamics and equally high intensity of military actions, far exceeding the scale of what was

happening on the fronts of the war in Syria in earlier years. In operational terms, this was primarily the result of a significant improvement in the effectiveness of loyalty forces, which on many key sections of the front managed to take the initiative and go to offensive activities. This situation was primarily due to the growing presence of foreign military formations in the conflict (both regular and paramilitary – especially from Iran, Russia, Lebanese Hezbollah, Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) on the side of the authorities in Damascus. Russia's air support for pro-government forces, provided since September 2015 by combat aircraft and impact helicopters from the operational units of the Russian Aerospace Forces stationed at the Syrian air base in Hmeymin, Latakia, has been of particular importance here. The delivery of new (most modern in its class) armaments and military equipment from Russia, especially armored and artillery equipment, communications equipment, small arms, etc., was of great importance for increasing the effectiveness of the al-Assad forces.

The strategic effects of these factors appeared very soon: the al-Assad regime managed to regain many key regions and locations in the past year, mainly in the central and northern parts of Syria. The greatest success of government forces has been the regaining of Aleppo, the largest urban center of northern Syria, the capital of the province of the same name, a city of great strategic and symbolic importance, mainly due to historical conditions and demographic and economic potential. It is worth remembering that the geography of Syria is determined in some way by the fact that one who controls Aleppo and surrounding areas, while holding Damascus, Homs and Hama (other large cities of the country), has in essence the key to power over the most important areas of the state. By winning Aleppo in December 2016, al-Assad's regime gained control of these significant regions meaning that the rebels eventually lost the chance to defeat the current government on the battlefield.

On the other hand, opponents of the Damascus government continue to dominate several regions of the country of strategic importance, which prevents the regime from announcing victory. This is true even in the face of the fact that a much smaller part of the territory of former Syria (than that controlled by the Syrian Kurds, not to mention the caliphate) is in the hands of the divided and disturbed armed opposition. The rebels now control only the northern province of Idlib, scraps of territory in the south (parts of Da'ara province), and several small enclaves in the center (including Rastan in Homs province and Douma in the suburbs of Damascus). The Syrian Free Army also occupied in recent months the belt of the

Syrian border with Turkey taken from the so-called Islamic State (IS) thanks to Ankara's militaristic involvement.

Turkey's open military entry into direct play in Syria has been another factor in the past year, exacerbating and complicating the strategic situation in the Syrian conflict. Formally fighting against IS terrorists, Turkey has, from the beginning (August 2016), treated its Operation Euphrates Shield in Syria as a campaign in the strategic and political sense above all against Syrian Kurds and their ambitions to create their own state organism (or at least gaining wide autonomy from Damascus). Kurdish communities in northern Syria, together with ethnic and religious minorities (including Christians), have managed to create relatively good and lasting quasi-state structures in the past three years, effectively addressing the threat posed by the so-called Islamic State. The Kurdish emancipation in Syria – along with a similar process in Iraq and growing ethnic tensions in Turkey itself – has, however, become a factor that has pushed the authorities in Ankara to engage directly in Syrian affairs. This coincided with the exacerbation of the relations between the Syrian Kurds and the government in Damascus, which had previously conducted a joint fight against the IS. Interestingly, these events took place in the context of Turkey's rapprochement to Russia, the main non-regional ally of the government of Bashar al-Assad. This evolution of Moscow's strategy, from the full and unconditional support for Damascus to a rapprochement with actors so far against the current Syrian regime, confirms the assumption that the objectives of Russian diplomatic and military activities in the Levant are complex and multi-faceted.

Syrian war - uncertain prospects

The war in Syria, since it ceased to be a classic internal civil war two years ago, and instead has become a substitute battlefield for external actors, has no real chance of ending as a result of the simple compromise mechanism agreed by the opposing sides i.e. the government and the armed rebels. On the other hand, after five years of conflict, the number of external 'patrons' and allies standing behind each side is so great, presenting so diverse interests and strategic goals that it actually prevents peace in Syria with their participation within a wide forum of multilateral diplomacy. It was clearly visible in the peace negotiations that took place over many months in Geneva, and a number of smaller truce initiatives, undertaken ad hoc mainly for humanitarian causes. This will also most likely be

the fate of the latest attempt at diplomatic and political regulation of the Syrian conflict during the conference in Astana. Peace initiatives that from the very start do not take into account the voice of all those involved in Syria are already doomed to failure. Meanwhile, for example, the West still does not want to talk about Syria with Hezbollah or Iraqi Shiite militias. The Turks do not allow the Kurds to the bargaining table, and the Syrian opposition does not agree to unconditional direct negotiations with the regime. In Astana a place has not even been found for the U.S., a key state in this context.

These contradictions of interests and objectives, presented in the context of Syria by the players involved in the game, mean that the conflict will not expire in the short term. The factors that have a negative impact on the situation in Syria and which fuel the war are the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry, Iran's strategic dispute with the Arab monarchs of the Gulf region, the Kurdish issue unresolved for over the past 100 years, and the growing Islamic Sunni religious extremism (including the Caliphate).

The Syrian war now reflects most of the regional and trans-regional problems and challenges in international relations. This conflict has become for the world what in the 1930s was the war in Spain. It was officially referred to as a 'home' war, but in reality it was a test ground and a 'proxy battlefield' for the then European powers. And just like the Spanish war 80 years ago, the current Syrian conflict may only be solved by a strong, unambiguous military victory of one of the parties. This would allow ending the war, though it would not eliminate the underlying causes that led to its outbreak.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The European Union and the United States, in shaping its strategy against the Syrian conflict, should ultimately reject unrealistic assumptions about the change of power in Syria. This implies the necessity to re-evaluate the existing axioms, and depart from their engagement with Bashar al-Assad. Especially since their experience so far has shown that Western states have no coherent concept of who would replace President al-Assad and his regime, but they do not even have the right instrument to try to force his overthrow/resignation. After assuming the presidency by Donald Trump the change of the U.S. policy towards the Syrian conflict, in the spirit of hard Republican realism, seems almost certain. The European Union states, majority of which still perceives the international reality

through the prism of idealism, must realize that bringing democracy to Syria is rather a question for the distant future.

2. Instead of trying to change the regime in Damascus, the West should significantly and vigorously increase its efforts to end the war in that country. The priority should be to stop the bloodshed and to create conditions for millions of refugees to return to their country – that is what Syrian people, tormented by the six-year war, expect. The West should therefore endeavor to work out, in the multilateral diplomacy forums, optimally: the UN mechanisms regulating these issues, working with countries actively involved in Syria (Russia, Iran, Turkey). It is time for Western states to embrace bold and visionary diplomatic initiatives that attempt to set the ultimate goal, the end of the Syrian slaughter. Each day of delay means more dozens of innocent civilians.

3. At the same time the complete liquidation of the caliphate and the limitation of activities of the so-called Islamic state must be the priority of Western activities. The continuation of this criminal structure in the heart of the Middle East is a deadly threat to the security and stability of not only this region but the entire globe as well. Western states need to make genuine efforts to do so, abandoning their current actions, largely superficial. It is also important to develop a coherent, long-term (primarily social-economic) plan to rebuild the areas destroyed by the caliphate and provide them with opportunities for development. This, however, will be very difficult as part of the present territory of the 'Islamic state' covers the territory of Syria, and thus is, in some way, out of reach of any potential assistance programs of the international community. On the other hand, the experience so far of reconstruction of the areas liberated from the hands of the caliphate in Iraq is also not optimistic (e.g. Ramadi or Tikrit).

4. The third pillar of the new Western strategy towards Syria and the Levant should be more active and coherent support for the independence aspirations of the Kurds. The current situation in the region indicates that a strong, pro-Western (and strongly supported by the West) Kurdish political organism could be a factor in stabilizing and balancing a number of unfavorable processes for Europe and the U.S. such as Islamic extremism, Sunni- Shiite rivalry, Iran's growing role, etc. The Kurds supported by the West would also be a natural (and effective) element of pressure on Turkey, which is increasingly moving away from its NATO allies more and more depicts imperial neo-Ottoman ambitions directed not only to the Levant, but broader – the entire Middle East. The condition of such action is obviously

the internal stability of Kurdish communities and the political consensus among their elites, which seems to be more and more of an issue.

5. The West in its actions towards the Middle East should also work to strengthen these regional partners who are its natural allies. First of all it concerns Israel, the only democracy in the region and the state closest to Western standards. It is also important to tighten ties with Jordan, Egypt or Tunisia. The purpose of these activities should be building a proper climate and atmosphere of consensus, opposed to the narrative of the clashes of civilization and the determinism of the religious war.

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