



Syria: The Third Year of War

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In the current issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers” Senior Fellow at the Casimir Pulaski Foundation Mr. Tomasz Otłowski analyses the recent developments of the conflict in Syria. “For about two years now the Syrian conflict has not been a typical civil war fought between two sides easily and clearly identifiable as political and ideological rivals, operating within a single state organism. In the case of the Syrian war what we have increasingly been dealing with is a conflict of international scope and nature, which is, in fact, a regional war.”

We encourage you to read the new issue of the “Pulaski Policy Papers”!

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The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-partisan think tank with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out such activities as conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders in Poland and abroad. The Casimir Pulaski Foundation is one of only two Polish institutions that have a partnership status with the Council of Europe and is a member of the Group Abroad – an umbrella organization of top 40 Polish NGOs working outside of Poland.

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The current operational situation in Syria

The strategic situation in Syria has not changed in recent weeks: the regime of President Bashar al-Assad still has the power and control of most of the territory, and the opposition is not able to bring about his downfall. The forces on both sides of the war are equally matched and locked in a stalemate that remains unaltered even when one side manages to successfully implement some local operational initiatives in a part of the country. Even the temporary slow-down of forces loyal to President Assad, which lasted few weeks and was caused by the threat of U.S. military intervention, did not have any effect on the situation in the conflict. The rebels failed to take advantage of the tactical and operational advantage that they had temporarily acquired thanks to the one-month suspension of operations by the Syrian Arab Air Force (SAAF). Fearing an American attack, the Syrian air force scattered its aircrafts to temporary airfields at the end of August 2013, halting all combat flights. In the second half of September 2013, when the international situation around Syria began to stabilize, SAAF actions resumed, quickly reaching the same level of intensity as from before the crisis (i.e., approximately a dozen combat flights a day).

At the beginning of October 2013, both sides of the conflict intensified activities on land as well. The pro-government forces – mainly Lebanese Hezbollah troops and Shiite volunteers from Iraq, supported by units of the Syrian army – took the offensive on the southern outskirts of Damascus. As a result, the loyalists took over two areas previously controlled by the rebels. Having recaptured the suburbs of Damascus, government forces have been able to resume the control of the roads leading south to the border with Jordan, where the bases of the government forces are still situated. Another government forces offensive conducted has been taking place in southern Syria on the border with Iraq. Here the leading role has been played by irregular Syrian Shia and Alawite formations which are “advised” by instructors from Iran. The purpose of this operation has been to strengthen the presence of government forces near the border with Iraq, whose territory is increasingly becoming the logistics and transport supply base for Damascus.

The rebels for their part have once again tried to finally break the resistance of the remaining government forces in the north-western province of Idlib. The effectiveness of these measures has been severely affected by a confrontation between al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (the two main Islamist groups in Syria who follow the ideology of Al-Qaeda and enjoy its official support). The restrained attitude of the Kurds, who control much of the area of Idlib, does not help the rebels either.

Recent analysis (including that carried out by the U.S. intelligence community) indicates that the vast majority of the rebel forces fighting today in Syria are Islamist formations, at

best associated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (supported by Turkey), and at worst the global jihad movement, represented by Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, reports from Syria do not inspire optimism in this respect; more and more rebel groups, so far operating within the formally secular military structures of the pro-Western Free Syrian Army (FSA), have been joining the Islamist formations, swearing *bajat* (an oath of allegiance) to their commanders (and often Ayman al-Zawahiri, the emir of Al-Qaeda himself). On one day alone (16 October 2013) such a step was taken by more than 60 rebel groups and divisions fighting under the FSA banner in southern Syria. The disturbingly massive scale of this phenomenon has prompted the White House to radically curtail its programme of supplying of weapons and combat equipment to the FSA, which had been implemented only a few months before. Currently, the FSA receives from the U.S. only small arms (mostly “Kalashnikovs” assault rifles, bought in bulk by the CIA in the Balkans) and ammunition.

International conditions

The September crisis in Syria has had a significant impact on major international aspects of this conflict. First of all, it became clear that the United States and Europe do not have any political plan to solve the Syrian problem. Washington's threat of direct military intervention, made on the basis of questionable evidence concerning the alleged responsibility of the authorities in Damascus for the use of chemical weapons on August 21, 2013, turned out to be a bluff. President Barack Obama from the very start, in both the strategic and military sense, blew his plan for a military operation by presenting to the public all too clearly the timeframe within which such an attack could happen, and revealed his intentions of using limited power and resources. He also did not acquire support from key European allies (especially the UK). To make matters worse, the U.S. president unexpectedly faced the humiliating prospect of Congress voting against intervention in Syria. Since the chances of a majority of lawmakers in Congress approving of another U.S. war in the Middle East were slim, the White House welcomed Russia's diplomatic offer. This offer was used by the U.S. administration in an attempt to save the President's remaining international prestige, even though the Russian plan has failed to contribute in any way to a cessation of, or even a decrease in the scale of, the carnage that has been taking place in Syria for years now. The topic of liquidating Syria's chemical weapons is presented today by the United States almost as a solution to the Syrian problem, but it does not in fact bring this goal even a millimetre closer.

Moscow has skilfully exploited the fact that the U.S. administration has led itself into a diplomatic impasse. Setting Damascus a clear red line a year ago, the White House implied that crossing it would result in military action by the West. When realization of this threat turned out to be unrealistic for many reasons, the Americans fell into their own trap. The Russians then proposed a solution, thanks to which Washington could save face and extricate itself, while the Kremlin has gained the chance to realise a number of important strategic objectives, both in terms of global policy and specifically the conflict in Syria. First of all, joining the diplomatic game revolving around Syria, Russia has presented itself as an effective international player, as a power with not only global aspirations, but possessing the ability to implement them. Secondly, Moscow has managed to effectively prevent the American operation against Syria, which – even though limited in scale, resources, and duration – would probably seriously weaken the al-Assad regime, perhaps contributing to his downfall. Russians defended their faithful ally in the Middle East, proving at the same time that they are loyal allies who do not leave their partners in the lurch. Finally, the Kremlin has managed to subtly and with a peculiar grace embarrass the U.S. (and Obama himself), demonstrating America's inability to take effective action “for peace and stability”

in the Middle East. American sabre rattling was discredited by Russia's cool, precise and perfectly calculated diplomatic action. Most likely, it was not only Damascus they consulted with in pursuing this course of action, but also pro-Russian actors involved in the conflict, such as China and Iran.

Besides, Iran has grown to become today the main military and logistical support of the regime in Damascus, playing the Syrian card effectively in its game with the West over its own nuclear program. The active involvement of Iranians in the conflict in Syria, although resulting from fundamental geopolitical reasons, is also designed to maintain the interest of the West in the situation in the Levant, which at the same time moves the focus away from the issue of Iran's nuclear program. The same applies to recent actions taken by the new President of the Islamic Republic of Iran: statements conciliatory in tone; a phone conversation with Barack Obama; and the alleged concessions in talks on the resumption of negotiations with the major powers: all serve to create the perfect atmosphere for a “new start” for Tehran's relations with the international community. The real purpose of these actions is obvious: to gain time so that Iran's nuclear program could move forward, bringing Tehran closer to constructing its own nuclear weapon.

The crisis of American leadership in the West regarding the Syrian issue, which was revealed in full force during the September crisis, again increased the strategic importance of Turkey. This is the only NATO country that borders Syria and has long aspired (for historical and geopolitical reasons) to be the main player in the Levant region. The recent events have shown that neither Washington nor the EU is in a position to develop a coherent and effective strategy on the Syrian issue. They have willingly relinquished this thankless task and passed it on to Ankara, whose role in the war in Syria has been gradually increasing. Recent information indicates a significant shift in Turkey's policy towards the Syrian opposition. The Turks are gradually moving away from supporting secular and pro-Western insurgency structures to strengthen those elements that have a “moderate” Islamist nature and are linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. For about two years now the Syrian conflict has not been a typical civil war fought between two sides easily and clearly identifiable as political and ideological rivals, operating within a single state organism. In the case of the Syrian war what we have increasingly been dealing with is a conflict of international scope and nature, which is, in fact, a regional war.
2. The area and population of Syria are now a testing ground, a battlefield in the proxy war. Both regional and supra-regional actors who are interested in the future of the entire region of the Middle East are fighting here (fighting both directly and indirectly, politically or militarily). Here we are dealing with a conflict between Iran against Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Ankara against Riyadh (fighting for people's hearts and minds in the world of Sunni Islam), Sunni against Shia, Islamists (or “faithful”) against the “infidels” (i.e., the followers of all other religions and professions than Sunni Islam), as well as the Russians against the Americans and Europeans. Syria, like the “devil's lens” brings together all the Middle East's existing conflicts, disputes and quarrels, as well as rivalries of competing entities from outside the region.
3. The West – the U.S. and the European Union – must take note of the fact that the Syrian conflict is not a classic civil war, like those they have had to deal with in the last twenty years in different parts of the world (Bosnia, Myanmar, Rwanda, etc.). Western countries should start to see the Syrian conflict according to its actual character: a regional war, which, although in a military sense taking place only within Syria's borders, can spread to neighbouring countries at any moment, especially Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey (due to the Kurdish factor).

4. Without being aware of the strategic and geopolitical conditions mentioned above, the West does not stand a chance of solving the Syrian problem. The EU and the U.S., when making political and diplomatic plans and humanitarian actions, must take into consideration reasonable and accurate assessments of the reality in and around Syria.

5. The adoption of efforts by the international community to completely eliminate Syria's arsenals of chemical weapons would undoubtedly be a step in the right direction. Despite the objective difficulties of the operation (which, after all, would have to be conducted in a state undergoing bloody and chaotic armed conflict), it is impossible not to notice that this action has essentially replaced the international community's full commitment to ending the Syrian war itself. In other words, the energy and commitment of international organizations (UN, OPCW) are being directed towards fragmentary, specific aspect of the conflict in Syria, aspect that is actually of a minor significance. The war itself continues, and a few hundred people are losing their lives every day in this country. It should not be forgotten that a few thousand people were killed as a result of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, while as a result of conventional military operations conducted in the past two and a half years, about a hundred thousand people have been killed.

6. The approach of the West to the Syrian opposition needs an urgent rethink. The increasingly swift and noticeable decomposition of opposition structures of a nominally pro-Western character is a worrying trend. Such a situation may soon force Europe and America into having to make a political and strategic choice between the need to support "moderate" Islamists or the total withdrawal of their involvement in the Syrian conflict. Both scenarios would be extremely detrimental to the future of the situation in Syria and the possible influence of the West over developments in the country.

7. Turkey's activities should also be carefully observed. Its growing role in the context of the Syrian conflict and the situation in the region, although certainly desirable, also brings along many potential problems. The most important of these is the risk of a conflict of Turkish interests in the Levant with the interests of Saudi Arabia (the other strong regional player, aspiring to lead the Sunni Muslim community) and Iran (which is interested in defending the status quo in Syria). Turkey's ambitions, aspirations and interests also refer to: the geopolitical game in Central Asia and the Caucasus (here the risk is an increase in rivalry with Russia and China); competition from Europe (the EU); and the Kurdish question. In all of these aspects, Turkey's policies and actions could push the country into a collision course with NATO allies, particularly the United States. With the ISAF operation in Afghanistan ending at the end of December 2014, from a strategic and political standpoint already regarded a failure, such a situation may further weaken the coherence and effectiveness of the Alliance at a critical moment.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation

is an independent think tank which specializes in foreign policy, with a mission to promote freedom, equality and democracy, as well as to support actions of strengthening civil society. The foundation carries out activities both in Poland and abroad, among others in Central and Eastern Europe and in North America.

The Casimir Pulaski Foundation was founded due to political changes that took place in Poland after 1989. The principal values of Casimir Pulaski (freedom, justice and democracy) are an inspiration for every initiative undertaken by the Foundation. A few of the Foundations activities include: conducting scientific research, preparing publications and analyses, organizing seminars and conferences, providing education and support for leaders (www.instytutprzywodztwa.pl).

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