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# NO END TO THE WAR IN SIGHT – THE FLARE-UP OF NEW VIOLENCE IN SYRIA

Jasmina Rupp

*The military escalation since the beginning of 2018 has brought peace prospects into the distant future. The war has shifted from the east block to the west of Syria and brought new, dangerous conflict constellations in which state actors are directly confronted: the Turkish claim to control Manbij and the crisis with the US, the struggle for the resource-rich region Deir ez-Zour and the direct conflict between Russia and the US as well as an escalation between Israel and Iran in southwestern Syria. Additionally, as a result of alleged chemical weapons attacks, ‘punitive actions’ by Western states, such as air strikes on the regime’s military bases and its allies, could further increase the escalation risk.*

## Standstill at international peace talks

The peace conferences initiated by Russia in recent years in Astana and Sochi prove that the post-war order in Syria is determined not by an international diplomatic process of the UN, but by the three conflict actors Russia, Iran and Turkey. The Astana process is considered a consultation platform for the three negotiating countries and focuses purely on the military component of the Syrian conflict. In this format, where the US is completely excluded, they negotiate among others the exchange of prisoners, the transfer of corpses, evacuation agreements, protection of cultural assets and selective ceasefires. All these points are not in conflict with their military offensives in Syria.

The „Syrian National Dialogue Congress“ organized by Russia at the end of January in Sochi aimed to summon all Syrian actors to the negotiating table for the first time, including the Kurds who had previously been excluded. However, Russia failed to realize its objectives as the Kurdish PYD party and the main opposition group HNC boycotted the talks in protest against the ongoing offensives of Turkey in Afrin and the regime in Idlib and East Ghouta res-

pectively. Russia, which has until now presented itself as a ‘peace facilitator’ in the Syrian conflict, is unable to inspire a political solution in the eighth year of the war.

The failure of the Sochi conference, the results of which should serve as the basis for new UN-sponsored negotiations in Geneva, thus means a temporary halt to international peace talks for the current time. UN measures such as the Security Council resolution of 24 February, which provided for a 30-day ceasefire for East Ghouta, once again illustrates the impotence of the UN and the limited impact their decisions ultimately have on local events, given the lack of implementation and sanction mechanisms.

For the past seven years, the Syrian regime has refused to make serious concessions to settle the conflict in all international formats and will not do so in the

near future, especially as it sees itself victorious in light of the ongoing territorial conquests. This is a reality that must also be acknowledged by the supporters of the opposition. There are likely to be more 'regional peace talks' in the coming months, but there is no internationally-recognized diplomatic process to stabilize Syria.

### **Flare up of new battles**

The 'de-escalation zones' installed in 2017, which significantly reduced levels of violence for months, were never intended to be permanent. Their establishment is considered part of a military strategy that allowed pro-Assad forces to move much-needed troops between different fronts.

The Assad regime and its allies were able to recapture strategically important areas in the east of the country from the terrorist organization Islamic State (ISIS) in the race against the US and the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) they support. With the beginning of 2018, the regime again shifted its attention to the rebel areas in western Syria, which are largely regarded as de-escalation zones.

In Idlib, Ghouta, and South-west Syria regime forces were able to regain control over several strategically important regions, including the air force base Abu al-Duhur in Idlib and the city Beit Jinn, located closely to the Israel-held Golan heights. A ground offensive to recapture the last rebel-stronghold East-Ghouta close to the centre of Damascus, which started in mid-February, is now of highest priority, given that rebels nearly surrounded the capital city in 2013 and posed a significant threat by launching attacks on the regime in the following years. The rural areas of Damascus are also of great importance for Iran, because Iranian military bases could be threatened by rebel forces.

After successfully capturing East-Ghouta, the regime will focus on the last rebel strongholds in Deraa and Idlib. First airstrikes in Deraa in mid-March, violating the de-escalation agreement facilitated by Russia, Jordan and the US, have already been carried out. Unlike the attacks in Ghouta, these regime offensives will most likely face resistance by foreign actors,

such as Israel and Turkey. In Idlib, Turkey acts as a "protective force" for the opposition and hopes to prevent a capturing of the region. In fact, twelve Turkish observation posts have already been established. In turn, opposition forces have declared their willingness to support the Turkish offensive against Kurds. Additionally, Ankara is concerned that a regime offensive will cause the approximately three million refugees who are currently living in Idlib to flee to Turkey.

### **From proxy war to the direct confrontation of great powers?**

Next to the main conflicts between regime and opposition and the war against ISIS, a new dynamic which could potentially lead to a regional escalation emerged, when within a couple of weeks after the end of January, five state actors faced each other in a direct conflict: a) The Turkish claim to control Manbij and the crisis with the US, b) the battle for the resource-rich region Deir ez-Zour and the dispute between the US and Russia, as well as c) an escalation between Israel and Iran in South-west Syria. Additionally, as a result of alleged chemical weapons attacks, 'punitive actions' by Western states, such as air strikes on the regime's military bases and its allies, could further increase the escalation risk.

### ***Manbij and the crisis between US and Turkey***

The announcement that US will not only have troops stationed in regions controlled by Kurds (SDF) even after ISIS is defeated, but will also build a border protection force of 30.000 personnel, which will be partly composed of Kurdish soldiers, has triggered a Turkish countermeasure.

Turkey perceives the YPG, a dominant force within the SDF, to be an offspring of PKK in Syria and thus considers it as a 'terrorist group' and a direct security threat. For Ankara, the YPG's attempt to connect Kurdish regions by crossing the Euphrates-river in 2016 was already a step too far. By launching an offensive in Afrin, Turkey has proven its willingness to use military power to defend its interests in Syria, not shying away from the NATO-ally US.

The city Manbij, freed from ISIS in 2016 by Kurdish fighters, where a large number of the 2000 American special forces and military advisors in northern-Syria are stationed, is as a symbol for the Turkish-American strife for power and influence. Yet, both sides are not interested in a military conflict, instead are currently holding negotiations about possibilities and limitations of an autonomous Kurdish region. The US is faced with a difficult balancing effort: while the US still needs the support of its Kurdish allies in the fight against ISIS, it also wants to avoid a direct confrontation with Turkey, which remains a strategically important NATO partner.

### ***The Russian-American dispute over the resource-rich region Deir ez-Zour***

The airstrike close to Deir Ez-Zor in February was a demonstration of power by the United States. However, this incident does not signal that the American engagement in Syria is undergoing a change in character. Rather, it is a sign that Washington's interests in Syria are increasingly threatened.

Indeed, the airstrike is a reaction to the crossing of the Euphrates and the advancement of the SDF- and US-military base by a 500-strong unit, which, according to media reports, includes Russian mercenaries. Information about Russian casualties caused by US airstrikes range from dozens to two-hundred, marking the first deaths of Russian citizens due to an American air strike in Syria.

With US support, Kurdish SDF forces have freed numerous gas- and oil fields in Deir ez-Zour that have been under ISIS' control. February's attack indicates that the regime, Russia, and Iran tried to test the 'defensive lines' with the aim of recapturing the resource-rich region of Deir ez-Zour.

In 2017, Russian news outlets reported that Assad has promised a 25% share of profits to a Russian oil company in exchange for sending mercenaries who support the regime's offensive. To regain control over the province, though, is not only vital for Assad, but also of pivotal importance for Iran, which aims at controlling the entire Iraqi border region.

A new regime-offensive in East-Syria and a consequent direct confrontation between Russia and the United States are very probable. The American military presence in Kurdish regions is not only threatened by Russia, but also by numerous regional forces including: Iraq, Turkey, Iran and the Syrian regime. With all these countries hoping to reduce Washington's influence in Syria, American interests are under serious threat. The US has repeatedly stated that it hopes to avoid a direct conflict with the regime and its allies. Yet, it remains to be seen how the United States will secure its interest in Syria and what sacrifices it is willing to take.

### ***The escalation between Iran/Hezbollah and Israel in south-west Syria***

The regime carried out numerous attacks on rebels despite the de-escalation zones in south-west Syria installed by Russia, US and Jordan. A central piece of the agreement is Russia's commitment to ensure a ceasefire through its influence on the regime while also distancing the Lebanese Hezbollah and pro-Iranian militias from the Israeli border. However, Moscow's influence over the regime and Iran seems to be limited, which, from Israel's standpoint, is concerning.

At the end of December 2017, the regime, with support of pro-Iranian militias, captured the city Beit Jinn, located closely to the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.

In mid-February, an Iranian drone was shot down after it had violated Israeli air space in the Golan heights. Israel then used air strikes to attack the Tiyas military base close to Palmyra, where a control centre for Iranian drones is assumed to be located. During this attack, Assad-forces employed their missile defence system to down an Israeli F-16 fighter jet. Israel reacted with an extensive shelling of Syrian and Iranian positions.

Since the start of the Syria conflict, this was the first occurrence of a dangerous confrontation between Israel on the one side and Syria and Iran on the other side. The incident further marked the first loss of Israel's Air Force since the end of the Lebanon war in 1982. While the Assad-

regime praised the shooting down of the F-16 Fighter Jet, it should be noted that Israel has carried out over 100 air strikes against pro-Iranian forces in Syria in recent years. Moreover, the incident has not caused any changes in the conflict scenario in South-west Syria at this present time. Iran is not interested in attacking Israel in the short-term. Nevertheless, the formation of pro-Iran militias, such as the 'Golan Liberation Brigade' and 'Brigade 313' in 2017, the suspected missile production sites and pro-Iranian weapon stocks, clearly show not only that de-escalation zones are ineffective but that a new Israeli-Syrian-Iranian confrontation has begun.

### Forecast

About a quarter of Syrian territory is controlled by the Kurdish SDF, backed by the US. The other three quarters are held by the Assad regime, supported by Russia and Iran and some few regions are under control of Turkey and its local allies.

Thus far, no consensus about Syria's future political order, either under the Assad regime or a transitional government, has been agreed upon. All powers will continue to re-evaluate their strategic goals in Syria and, if required, adapt them to political and military developments. As none of the actors have an interest in a direct confrontation that would result in a regional conflict, risking a wider conflagration, a military stalemate is inevitable. Instead, negotiations could pave the way for "red lines" to be re-drawn and for an outline of new areas of influence. Up until now, the Turkish intervention, Israeli attacks, Russian and American air strikes and Iranian offensives coexisted in an environment of violence without leading to a direct interstate conflict.

It is unclear how long the military forces of Russia, Iran, Turkey and the US will remain active in Syria and whether re-evaluating the 'zones of influence' will cause extensive conflicts between the state actors.

Tests of strength between the powers are likely to occur on various occasions.

### Recommendations

- **Transfer peace talks to Geneva:** Russia, Iran and Turkey should not shape the future of Syria independently. While the UN has often been impotent in the Syria conflict, it remains an important platform for talks and a mediator to help achieve a sustainable, internationally-recognised solution.
- **Acknowledge the Syrian realities:** The parties involved in the conflict have to accept that negotiations about a resignation of Assad are off topic. As an alternative, power-sharing concepts should be targeted. All ethnic and religious groups, the opposition included, should be given explicit roles and guarantees.
- **Bind financial assistance to pre-conditions:** Assad desperately needs foreign investments to rebuild Syria. The European Union and Gulf states should offer their support only in exchange for concessions by Assad in power-sharing-concepts. Infrastructure projects in destroyed parts of Syria could also partially lessen the strain Syrian refugees put on host countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.
- **Relaxation of the American-Turkish tensions:** the US has to actively pursue an easing of tensions with Turkey and further develop requirements for a potential autonomous Syrian-Kurdish region. Negotiations will have to include the sensitive matters of disarming the PKK offspring group in Syria and creating a Kurdish administration with the inclusion of all ethnic groups and inner-Kurdish factions, and which is not predominated by the political branch PYD.

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