

Position Papers

What Does New Political Push Mean for Syria?

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Syrian Opposition Council President Khaled Khoja, pictured left, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during their meeting in Moscow on 13 August 2015 [AFP/Kirill Kudryavtsev]

Abstract

The Syrian armed opposition's gains, especially in northern Syria, have stirred Russian and US fears about the possibility of a major regime collapse. This has prompted Moscow to return to the political solution approach to avert further expansion of the Islamic State (IS or Daesh) and to stop the regime's power from completely dissolving. For the US, this has prompted President Obama to intensify bids to Iran for cooperation to resolve the Syrian crisis. This is in part to prove to his Republican opponents that the nuclear deal will contribute to modifying Iran's behaviour and will motivate the country to cooperate in resolving the region's crises rather than exacerbating them.

Parallel to the military escalation in Zabadani, Iran re-launched its political initiative, which the Syrian opposition rejected, but which the regime quickly accepted because it guarantees its survival. Turkey has directly entered the fray in an effort to protect its interests in northern Syria, managing to broker a US agreement to establish an IS-free zone (which Turkey also intends to be Kurd-free).

Introduction

The Geneva II Conference held in early 2014 failed to achieve any results towards a political settlement, and instead resulted in an eighteen-month stalemate. However, in recent weeks, there has been an intensified political push on the Syrian issue. These efforts included a tripartite meeting held in Doha on 3 August 2015, among the Russian, Saudi Arabian and US foreign ministers. On the second day of the Doha meeting, Iran re-launched its political initiative. A week later, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir visited Moscow with the intention of completing the Russian–Saudi dialogue initiated at a

June meeting between Prince Mohammed bin Salman and President Putin in St. Petersburg.

Al-Jubeir's visit to Moscow was preceded by Riyadh's declaration that it had received a delegation, brokered by Russia, from the Syrian regime. Meanwhile, the UN envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, presented his thoughts on a resolution to the conflict in a brief submitted to the UN Security Council late last July, after holding long consultations in Geneva with the various parties to the crisis.

This diplomatic activity around the Syrian crisis is due to a series of recent political shifts and changes on the ground. These factors produced a number of opportunities and risks, which have emerged steadily with the continuation of the crisis and its complexity. Their effects have been reflected by the parties to the conflict in the region and at an international level. The so-called "diplomatic activity" has not yet yielded a tangible shift of the main parties to the crisis, nor has it resulted in any progress towards a political solution. This paper examines the actors involved in the new political push and three possible outcomes of this latest political activity.

Russian–American shift or stagnation?

The Syrian armed opposition forces' gains against the regime, especially in northern Syria (the latest of which entailed gaining control over all areas east of the Orontes River in Sahl al-Ghab of the Hama countryside) and their move towards regime's strongest social support base on the coastline raised Russian and US concerns of a major regime collapse. For Moscow, it returned to the idea of seeking a political solution based on the Geneva communique issued 30 June 2012, after betting on a military solution that would be in the regime's favour for most of 2014 following its faltering relations with the west post-Ukrainian crisis. Daesh's control over large areas north of Syria and east of the major capitals such as Homs and Damascus, in addition the archaeological city of Palmyra seized this past May, also re-incentivised the move towards facing the possibility of the regime's collapse in Damascus, and the subsequent chance of extremist organisations seizing the reins of power.

However, the Russian approach of seeking a political solution most importantly aims to maintain Bashar al-Assad's position in the equation of any solution. Russia believes that his departure would inevitably lead to the regime's collapse, the rule of chaos and the expansion of terrorism and extremism. In this sense, Moscow proposed the

establishment of a broad coalition that would unite the opposition – including Saudi Arabia and the Assad regime, as well as Turkey and Jordan – to confront Daesh.(1)

While the idea seemed illogical then – even to the Syrian regime, which said that it would require a miracle to achieve it(2) – Moscow did not take long before attempting to achieve this coalition. It reportedly held a meeting between the Saudi defence minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman and the Syrian National Security Bureau head, Major General Ali Mamlouk, in Jeddah on 7 July.(3)

Moscow tried to take advantage of rapprochement that began with Saudi Arabia when Russia abstained from voting on UN Security Council Resolution 2216 on Yemen, which was a blow to Iranian policy in the region. Russia wanted a breakthrough in the Saudi position on the Syrian crisis, but their attempts were unsuccessful, as indicated by the results of Jubeir's last visit to Moscow. Jubeir rejected the Russian initiative and stressed that his country would not participate in any coalition against terrorism in which Syrian authorities are included, pointing out that, "Assad's forces helped to strengthen IS's position because they directed their weapons towards their own people and towards the moderate opposition".(4) He repeated the same stance when Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov proposed establishing an alliance between the Assad regime and opposition forces to confront terrorism. Lavrov's proposal was reiterated during a visit by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces and the Syrian opposition to Moscow mid-August, which the coalition rejected.(5)

As for Washington, which shared Moscow's fears related to the Syrian regime's sudden collapse and further expansion of IS and other jihadist groups, it has maintained caution although it has increased military involvement in the Syrian conflict after reaching a final agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme. Restraint has characterised US policy on Syria since the beginning of the crisis. After the announcement of the Iranian nuclear deal, Washington reached an understanding with Ankara under which it agreed to Turkey's request to establish an IS-free zone (which Turkey wants to ensure will be Kurd-free as well) in northwest Syria in exchange for allowing the US to use Turkish airspace and military bases in the war against ISIS. Although the nuclear deal with Iran became an international legal document after UNSC Resolution 2231, there are still concerns about the potential ability of the US Congress to annul the agreement with Iran.

So, despite Washington's declaration of its commitment to protecting the Syrian opposition elements – who are undertaking US training programmes on how to

adequately respond to attacks that may be carried out against them by Syrian regime forces – the US has repeatedly emphasised that this protection will be exclusively in a defensive, rather than offensive, framework.⁽⁶⁾ On the other hand, in an attempt to reduce congressional opposition to the nuclear deal, Obama began to intensify calls to Iran for cooperation in resolving the Syrian crisis to prove to his Republican opponents that the nuclear deal will contribute to shifting Iranian behaviour and drive them to cooperate in settling the region's crises. This explains Obama's statement that he "senses a change in the Iranian position ... which may speed up a political solution to the Syrian crisis".⁽⁷⁾

Iranian–Turkish race on Syrian territory

Parallel to growing Russian concerns about the erosion of the regime's capabilities to hold on to its territory, Tehran realised, especially after Operation Decisive Storm, that Syrian opposition forces do not lack the determination to expand in territory. Further, the likelihood of the Assad regime regaining control of areas it lost in parts of the country has diminished, if not become impossible. With the opposition approaching regime strongholds on the coastline, an idea has been raised to secure an area that the media has dubbed "useful Syria", which includes Damascus, Homs and the coast.

In the face of this emerging reality, Iran began moving on two tracks: The first entails military actions aimed at "securing useful Syria" in exchange for dispensing areas that are difficult to defend or require significant resources to secure, especially in the north. Assad's recent statements have clearly expressed aspects of this strategy, such as when he emphasised that his army, after nearly four years of fighting, is no longer able to retain a large part of the Syrian territory.⁽⁸⁾ In this direction Iran and its allies on the ground – especially Hezbollah – are doing everything in their power to wrest control of the strategic city of Zabadani along the border with Lebanon.

Zabadani is regarded as the last big city controlled by the opposition forces in the Qalamoun area, and gaining control of it is vital to ensuring continued communication between regime-controlled areas in and around Damascus and Hezbollah-controlled territory in Lebanon. On the other hand, the campaign against Zabadani aims to clear out the armed opposition from all "the useful areas of Syria". The regime seeks to convert this area in particular into a fully secured one under the control of Iran and its allies in anticipation of any changes in the course of the conflict, or in the event Syria moves towards de facto partition.

Parallel to the military escalation in Zabadani, Tehran re-launched its “peace initiative”, which it had initially launched in October 2012, to resolve the crisis as a substitute for the Geneva process to which Iran was not a party and did not accept. The modified initiative provides for a comprehensive ceasefire, the formation of a national unity government, and an amendment of the Constitution in order to ensure the protection of minority rights, and calls for parliamentary and presidential elections under international auspices. The regime was quick to accept its ally’s initiative because it entrenches its survival and does not even mention reducing its powers, as was the case with the originally proposed initiative.⁽⁹⁾ The opposition rejected the initiative and considered it an attempt to avoid the framework for the negotiating process – the Geneva declaration, which provides for the formation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers.⁽¹⁰⁾

Parallel to the Iranian move in the south, Turkey directly entered the conflict in an effort to protect its interests in northern Syria. Ankara is taking advantage of the growing US need to use Turkish airspace and military bases in the faltering war against Daesh. Turkey succeeded in gaining US approval to establish an IS-free zone. The region could, at a later stage, be developed as a safe haven in northern Syria. The proposed area extends one hundred kilometres wide and fifty kilometres deep inside Syrian territory, beginning at Jarabulus on the Euphrates River and stretching towards the strategic city of Azaaz in the west.

Turkey wants this region for three reasons. First, it prevents any opportunity for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – a Syrian version of the PKK – to achieve territorial contiguity between the three self-governing Kurdish areas established in the far north-east regions of Syria, Kobane in the north and Afrin in the north-west, which would allow the establishment of a Kurdish region along the Syria-Turkey border. Second, Ankara has sought to distance IS from its southern border and prevent it from taking the areas controlled by “moderate” Syrian opposition forces or border crossings with Turkey, especially in the vicinity of Azaaz. Finally, this region could provide a future safe haven for the Syrian interim government’s activity within Syria and to assist in solving the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey.

Scenarios for resolving the Syrian crisis

Facts on the ground include gains by opposition factions, continuous erosion of the regime’s power and IS gaining control of large areas of Syria. Larger political developments include the P5+1-Iran nuclear deal; the Turkish–American understanding

on the so-called safe zone, which brings Turkey directly into the conflict; Iran's quest to protect its areas of influence in Syria; and Russia's attempt to benefit from its emerging rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. These factors combined have formed a new environment, which has pushed various parties to explore opportunities for resolving the Syrian crisis. However, the chances of these efforts succeeding, as evidenced by recent moves, are not yet fully discernible and are beset with many difficulties.

The multiplicity of parties to the crisis, its complexity and the need to achieve consensus on more than one level of conflict foresees the following future possibilities for Syria:

1. **Scenario 1:** The risks posed by the Syrian crisis for regional and international security – Syria's possible collapse, decline into chaos or complete seizure by radical groups – push regional and international parties concerned with the crisis (namely, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran), to reach a common vision to resolve the conflict. This would entail forcing the Syrian parties to the conflict to submit to the requirements of a settlement in which each party gets a portion of its claim, and where Syria preserves its unity and continuity.

Although all parties are aware of the continuing conflict's seriousness, the realisation of this possibility seems weak at the current stage. There is an inability to overcome Bashar al-Assad's hold and there are conflicting interests of the various parties and their vision for a solution. The extremes range from those who see Assad's departure as a necessary prerequisite for the unification of efforts to confront extremists and jihadi groups, and to maintain the continuity of the Syrian state and the rest of its remaining institutions, and this includes Saudi Arabia and Turkey. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who consider that his departure will lead to the collapse of the regime, anarchy and the spread of terrorism and extremism, and this party includes Russia and Iran.

On the other hand, the ability of external forces to influence their Syrian allies' conduct on the ground has not yet been tested. This is especially true in light of armed factions' internal considerations, local calculations and intense regional and international entanglements which leave the Syrian parties on the ground with very little room to manoeuvre.

2. **Scenario 2:** The regional and international parties failing to reach a consensus leads to a political settlement, where matters would move further towards

military escalation to break the equation of “no political solution and no military victory” that prevailed during the past three years. Saudi foreign minister al-Jubeir has clearly expressed the possibility of going in this direction when he said that Syria has “only two possible options and no third: either a political process and a peaceful transition of power leading to a new Syria without Assad, or a military option that would end with Assad’s defeat”.⁽¹¹⁾ However, the military takeover al-Jubeir spoke of is bound by the wills and interests of major and regional powers, as well as a high cost for the Syrian people.

3. **Scenario 3:** The conflict will continue and become chronic, with the insistence of all parties to adhere to their stated positions, but without significant changes on the battlefield due to lack of resources and the emergence of a general conviction regarding the inability of any party to be militarily decisive. The demarcation lines will be settled and the areas of influence would depend entirely on what is available from external support – a stalemate in which defeat is prevented, but so is victory. In this scenario, the regime and its allies may succeed in taking Zabadani from the opposition in exchange for retreating from areas of less importance to them in the north, such as Aleppo. This scenario means that a large area in the north will become subject to “moderate” opposition factions and will enjoy the protection of Turkey, as opposed to the emergence of an Iranian-sponsored entity, which includes Damascus, Homs and the coast, while the Islamic State, the Kurds and other factions would share the remaining areas.

Although this last scenario is likely based on current information, its cost will be great – not only for the Syrian people but also for the whole region, because it means transforming Syria into a large black hole that would absorb massive energies and resources. Internal conflict would turn into an unending war of attrition, destroying everyone’s capabilities. Globally, the price will be turning Syria into a factory for the production of extremism with international tendencies.

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