Mediterranean Conflicts and the Geopolitical Context

Proxy Wars and Spheres of Influence in Post-Isis Syria

Raymond Hinnebusch
Professor
School of International Relations
University of St Andrews

Context for the Struggle for Post-IS Syria

In the last years of the 2010s, the competitive intervention of rival powers in the Syrian crisis escalated into a contest to carve out spheres of geo-political influence in the country. As weaker opposition factions either lost out or were co-opted by the rival intervening powers, the hitherto highly fragmented Syrian battleground was consolidated into three major zones that came under the influence of these powers, while at the same time the race was on to fill the vacuum as ISIS contracted under US aerial bombardment. In 2017, 73% of the population lived under Syrian government control, buttressed by Russia and Iran, 17% under Turkish control or influence, 10% under the US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – also possessing vast territory and concentrated energy resources – with 1% remaining under ISIS (Lund, 2018). Russia, Iran, Turkey and the US each deployed certain state capacity-building initiatives to counter the insecurity in their own zones, but this very consolidation increased the risk of the permanent division of the country and armed confrontation among the proxies and their patron states. Three parallel but interlinked struggles of rival intervening powers and their Syrian proxies continued to rage at the end of the decade in northeast, northwest and southern Syria.

Parallel to this, a new diplomatic alignment over Syria took place with the failure of the UN-sponsored peace process, in which the US had played a cen-

tral role, and after the Russian military intervention of 2015, which allowed the regime to rebuff the jihadist surge that had threatened to overwhelm it and begin recovery of territory from the opposition. Russia reached agreements with the US, which was being overtly drawn into the Syrian conflict against ISIS, to eschew operations in the zones where the other was operating, effectively dividing control of the airspace between Russia in the west of the country and the US in the east. In parallel, Turkey's alarm at US-supported Kurdish advances against ISIS had re-aligned its interests toward Russia. This enabled Russia to displace the UN/Western-centred Geneva negotiations with a Russian-centred process at Astana and Sochi, also a result of its military intervention having narrowed down options for the exhausted opposition fighters and their Turkish backer. By bringing them, and also Iran, into the Astana process, Russia positioned itself at the centre of a tripartite alliance through which it partly detached Turkey from its alignment with the West's anti-Assad stance, and through which it would try to manage the outcome of the Syrian crisis without US participation. Russia's centrality to the crisis also allowed it to mediate between key regional rivals – Iran and Israel, the Syrian Kurds and Turkey.

The Struggle for Northeast Syria

The race to fill the IS vacuum in northeast Syria (2016-19)

With US air support, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) irregulars pushed IS out of Raqqa and set out to govern this vast Arab-populated province. In parallel, the Iranian-backed Assad regime forces moved toward Deir ez-Zor, a strategic

location because of its oil fields and border crossing at Abu Kamal, in competition with the SDF; regime forces reached the border but the SDF seized the main oil fields.

That the US sought to prevent the Damascus government from re-establishing control over its territory was clear from its attacks on pro-government forces when they advanced toward SDF positions and toward the country's eastern borders. US warplanes intercepted Syrian aircraft or armored forces probing the SDF controlled areas three times between 2016 and 2018: famously, in February 2018, US forces repelled a column advancing on an SDF base near Deir ez-Zor, killing scores, including many Russian mercenaries. They also attacked pro-regime forces probing the FSA enclave at Tanf on the Iraqi border (Hashem, 2017).The competition to fill the IS vacuum also created conflictual relations between the Russian and Iranian-backed pro-regime forces, the Turkish-backed ethnic Arab Free Syrian Army and the US-backed SDF (dominated by the Kurdish PYD). These conflicts were about Kurdish rule of Arab areas, Turkey's perception of the threat from the PYD; the regime's determination to restore full sovereignty over the east and the US' resolve to block this and also to roll back Iranian influence in Syria.

The Turkey-Russian/Damascus – Kurdish/US tug of war over northeast Syria

Turkey was outraged that the US had employed Kurdish-led forces to take back Sunni Arab areas from IS, which, it believed, inflated Kurdish ambitions to rule Sunni Arab areas of eastern Syria and also to establish a Kurdish state with a direct connection with the Mediterranean. In spite of some US concessions to Turkish sensibilities, notably, conceding some joint responsibility over the outskirts of PYD-controlled Menbij, Turkey remained dissatisfied, its interests somewhat converging with those of Russia and Iran, as a result of US policy. Turkey's shelling in November 2018 of Kurdish Syrian territories, the US' response to carry out joint military patrols with Kurdish forces on the Turkish border and Erdogan's condemnation of these seemed to signal the irreconcilability of US and Turkish goals in Syria.

The US appeared intent, even as ISIS was defeated, on establishing an indefinite protectorate in SDF-dominated eastern Syria and the energy resources concentrated there. Nevertheless, the PYD/SDF, uncertain of the extent of US commitment under the erratic Trump Administration, tried to hedge its bets by entering negotiations with the regime. The regime had retained a presence in SDF areas, e.g. at Qamishli airport, and in the negotiations, it insisted on control over border crossings and rejected any "separatist measure." The SDF might have been willing to concede Damascus' control over civil administration, but would not give up its military control of the east. The makings of a deal around certain interdependencies appeared possible: while the SDF controlled much of the oil and gas fields, the regime controlled the refineries; in the meantime, intermediaries bridged the two sides. The US stayed in eastern Syria to head off any political settlement between the regime and PYD (Hamidi, 2018).

Turkey was outraged that the US had employed Kurdish-led forces to take back Sunni Arab areas from IS, which also inflated Kurdish ambitions to establish a Kurdish state with a direct connection with the Mediterranean

The Battle over Trump's withdrawal bid

The battle over Trump's "withdrawal" from Syria, announced in December 2018, exposed the mainsprings and unparalleled incoherence of US policy, originating in the conflict between Trump's anti-interventionist instincts and the deep-seated interventionism of the foreign policy establishment's Syria hawks, particularly National Security Advisor John Bolton, Secretary of State Pompeo and Syria envoy Jim Jeffreys. Much of Washington's establishment condemned the withdrawal as a move likely to empower US enemies and damage US credibility and commitment to its allies, including Israel, which would feel it was left to face Iran by itself. Bolton's fall back position was to keep US positions in Tanf, astride communication links to Iraq as a barrier to

Iran, while Senator Lindsey Graham claimed he had convinced Trump to make withdrawal conditional on a total ISIS defeat, ensuring Iran would not fill the vacuum of the US withdrawal and protecting the Kurds – i.e. conditions that ruled out withdrawal for the indefinite future. Trump was eventually persuaded of the need to keep a reduced but sufficient presence in the area to enable the US to control Syria's hydrocarbons and communication links to Iran, via Iraq; play the spoiler regarding Russian ambitions in Syria; and force an Iranian withdrawal, thus reversing the apparent verdict of the geopolitical struggle for the Assad regime to survive and restore its sovereignty by frustrating its ability to reassert control over its territory and oil resources, and thereby undermining the country's post-war economic rehabilitation (Seligman and Hirsh, 2018).

Shifting regional alignments after the withdrawal announcement

Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal (even though not to be fully carried through) sparked a new "race" between Turkey and the Syrian regime to fill the potential vacuum in eastern Syria, with the Kurds trying to leverage their rivalry to retain their autonomy and Russia better positioned to broker all these competing claims.

Prior to Trump's withdrawal announcement, Turkey and the US had increasingly clashed over Washington's balancing act with its Syrian proxy, the Kurdish-led PYD, as the US supported the latter's militias and its autonomy from Damascus, conducted joint patrols with the PYD on Turkey's border and shielded it from Turkish military action. Trump's withdrawal announcement, after a phone call with Erdogan, was widely interpreted as a Turkish victory that enhanced its leverage with its Astana partners in Syria and would enable it to deal with the Kurds. Erdogan vowed to create a "security zone" deep into Syrian territory at the expense of the PDY, and a crisis with the US was averted in August 2019 when the US reached an agreement with Turkey to create a so-called "safe zone" in northeast Syria, increasing Turkey's ability to protect its borders and settle Syrian clients and refugees as a buffer against the Kurds. Trump's decision to pull forces from the northern border in October green lighted a Turkish invasion in October 2019 targeting the Kurdish-led Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF) and involving its proxies, including jihadists. The departure of thousands of refugees, particularly Kurds, from the area, which Turkey did not allow to return, together with its plans to settle Syrian Arabs in the area, raised the spectre of ethnic cleansing.

The prospect of a US withdrawal also seemed to present major new opportunities for the regime, exacerbating rivalries between the Turkish-backed opposition and America's SDF proxy in the east. With the US withdrawal announcement and a Turkish move imminent against it, the PYD invited regime (and Russian) forces to take up positions in juxtaposition with Turkish and US forces. In this period of uncertainty, the Kurds, in their negotiations with Damascus, lowered their sights from full sovereignty to a deal. They sought a formal return of central government sovereignty over the SDF areas in return for local autonomy, a "fair distribution" of the area's energy resources and the delegation of responsibility for security to SDF fighters nominally integrated into the Syrian army. They also wanted Russian and Syrian army troops to guard the border against Turkish incursions. The regime's return to the east was already incrementally underway in certain areas: government workers were returning to the Tabqa Dam near Raqqa.

The US military, while abandoning the northern border (and defence of the Kurds from Turkey), reinforce its presence southeast, to keep control of Syria's easternmost oil fields

This situation allowed Russia to assume the role of mediator between Turkey and the Kurds, which brought the Turkish offensive to an end and provided for Russian patrols between the two sides. Turkey established control over an *area 20 miles deep into Syrian territory between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ain, well short of its goal of controlling the whole border, especially to the east*. Russian and Syrian government troops were deployed to the east and west of a new border zone under Turkish control. Russian

troops took over several abandoned US military bases and established several more, including a helicopter base at the airport in Qamishli city. However, full US withdrawal proved illusory. After Trump's decision to keep enough presence in Syria to "secure the oil," the US military, while abandoning the northern border (and defence of the Kurds from Turkey), reinforced bases in Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah provinces – in effect, shifting its presence southeast – to keep control of Syria's easternmost oil fields and the crossing with Iraq. US forces repeatedly blocked attempts by Russian patrols to access and expand Moscow's new self-declared northeastern zone of influence. Another element of uncertainty derived from Turkey's ambitions came from the shelling of Syrian government and SDF positions in spring 2020, to establish full control of the border.

The Struggle for Northwest Syria

Idlib: the epicentre of jihadism

Idlib is home to over a million internally displaced persons, with a dense concentration of the militants most opposed to the regime and the Russians, many of them having been relocated from other conflict zones after regime sieges forced their surrender. There were some 60-70,000 armed fighters that were well dug-in, including 20,000 jihadists. The al-Qaeda-linked group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, controlled 65-70 percent of the province, while other rival groups, notably Ahrar al Sham, had become Turkish proxies. A 2017 agreement at the Astana talks between Russia, Turkey and Iran called for Idlib to become a "deconfliction zone" for which Turkey would take responsibility. Turkey established 12 military observation posts in the Idlib area to fulfill its responsibilities, giving it a legitimized military presence in the heart of northwest Syria. However, with the regime's victory over the opposition in the south, Damascus began to redeploy its forces for an assault on Idlib in order to push out Turkey and restore control of the Aleppo-Latakia (M4) and Aleppo-Damascus (M5) roads that run through Idlib province. Turkey, for its part, started deploying 20,000 Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters to Idlib from Turkish-controlled parts of northern Syria to block regime forces. If Turkey failed to protect its proxies in Idlib it would

lose its leverage in negotiations over any political settlement. Russia had the decisive say, since a Syrian government assault on Idlib could not succeed without Russian air support, while Turkey needed its permission to operate over Syrian airspace. Russia needed to neutralize the danger for Russian soldiers stationed in the Khmeimim air base from Idlib-based militants. Yet an all-out offensive would create a massive movement of civilians and rebel fighters toward the Turkish border, damaging Russia's relations with Turkey, as well as the efforts it was making to promote the return of refugees to Syria. Russia wanted opposition groups to give up their heavy and medium-range weapons and accept a ceasefire and government control of the province as had happened elsewhere, but the groups rejected this. Moscow had to calculate the possibility, amidst Western warnings, that the likely humanitarian disaster would be used to justify US intervention. To break the impasse, Russia and Turkey agreed on a demilitarized zone on Idlib's borders, the withdrawal of jihadists and heavy and medium weapons from it, including from areas close to Russia's Khmeimim airbase, and the opening of the strategic highways. The deal depended on Turkey's doubtful capacity to get jihadists to withdraw from the demilitarized zone. Indeed, HTS, in a late 2018 conflict with Turkish-backed factions in Idlib, asserted its control over the province, thereby greatly reducing Turkey's leverage over it.

Idlib is home to over a million internally displaced persons, with a dense concentration of the militants most opposed to the regime and the Russians

The agreement was, at best, partly observed. For one thing, the regime remained dissatisfied: while it sought to ultimately restore sovereignty over all of the Turkish-controlled zone, its priority objective was to acquire control of the strategic highways, particularly the intersection of the Aleppo-Damascus (M5) and Aleppo-Latakia (M4) highway, as the deal with Turkey had not opened them to secure traffic. The M4, which runs eastward from the coast toward the

border with Iraq, had been blocked for years. Russia had floated the idea of letting the rebels retain the city of Idlib under Turkish protection, along with territory up to the border, while Turkey and its rebel allies would pull back from the two vital highways. But with investments and housing constructed for IDPs inside Syria, Turkey demurred. It wanted its client Syrian rebel forces to retain control of a sizable territory in Syria, in effect designating north of the M4 and west of the M5 routes a Turkish "protectorate," in order to settle Syrian refugees and strengthen its hand in negotiations for a political settlement. Furthermore, instead of cracking down on jihadists, it recruited them to fight against the Russian-backed General Hafter in Libya (where Russia and Turkey were also backing opposing sides).

The most dangerous confrontation in Syria has been the Israeli-Iranian struggle, as it has the greatest potential to draw in the rival great powers

The Syria government offensive in Idlib province that began in December 2019 seized the town of Maaret al-Noman, a key to the M5, and, in the process, it surrounded Turkish observation posts preventing them from blocking the regime's advance. When regime forces hit one of these, on 2 February, Ankara sent five military convoys and deployed five new checkpoints. After five Turkish soldiers were killed on 10 February in a Syrian airstrike on a Turkish army location north of Idlib, Turkey sent further major reinforcements to Syria and demanded Syria pull back to pre-offensive lines. The regime took Saraqeb at the intersection of strategic highways and neither Turkey nor its proxies defended the town. In general, Turkey's proxies were proving ineffective in countering Syria's Russian or Iranian-backed militias. Russian-backed Syrian regime forces regained full control of the M5 and regime forces seized major opposition strongholds in northwest Aleppo province. From the beginning of its offensive to mid-January 2020, the regime regained control of almost a thousand square miles, amounting to 20% of Idlib

province and 15% of Aleppo province, displacing 900,000 people to the other opposition-held lands in the Turkish sphere of influence, despite Turkey's massive military build-up. Meanwhile, Moscow was seeking to broker a new agreement that would allow the regime to keep its gains. But at the end of February, Turkey went on the counter-offensive, following the killing of at least 34 Turkish soldiers that were resupplying observation posts in an airstrike. In this counter-offensive, Turkey shot down three Syrian warplanes and used drones to wreak havoc on Syrian ground forces, while Turkish-backed forces recaptured Saraqeb and reblocked the M4 and M5 highways. Russia's decision not to close the airspace was vital to Turkey's success, and, without support from Russian air defence, Syrian forces had little protection against Turkish drone strikes. Evidently, Putin was unwilling to sacrifice ties with Erdogan for the sake of Assad's needs, and on March 5, 2020, he and Erdogan agreed to a new ceasefire. They also agreed to establish a security corridor along the M4 and M5 highways; and, starting on 15 March, to launch joint Turkish-Russian patrols along them. While the accord cemented territorial gains by Syrian forces over Turkish-backed rebels, it also eased Ankara's fear of a massive new influx of Syrians fleeing bombardment in Idlib. Nevertheless, the agreement was as precarious as its predecessor: HTS continued to block the M4 and was split over the deal, while Turkey expanded its military presence and tried to upgrade its proxies, with the possible aim of denying the Syrian regime control of the M4 and the territory between this road and the Turkish border.

The Israeli-Iranian Proxy War in Southern Syria:

Perhaps the most dangerous confrontation in Syria has been the Israeli-Iranian struggle, as it has the greatest potential to draw in the rival great powers, the US and Russia. Israel, fearing the delivery of upgraded Iranian missiles to Hezbollah could put Israeli cities at risk in the event of a new war, waged a campaign of over 200 airstrikes against targets in Syria. While Israel (and the US) demanded Iran's full withdrawal from Syria, Russia needed to preserve Iranian ground support for the regime and dilute the

Israeli threat to its client. Moscow sought to broker a deal under which Iran would withdraw from the south near the Israeli border, in the wake of the Syrian government's recapture of the area, and Israel would limit its campaign; when Israel demurred, and Israeli raids near Russia's Latakia airbase led to an inadvertent downing of a Russian military aircraft, Russia delivered upgraded air defence capabilities to Syria, seeking to narrow Israeli freedom of action. Russia hoped, having reinforced its hand, to continue its balancing role between the Syrian regime, Iran and Israel. However, this seemed so ineffective in constraining Israeli freedom of action against Iranian and Iran-aligned targets that it gave rise to the suspicion that Russia was not displeased to see Iran, a rival for influence over the Syrian government, cut down to size. For Iran, its presence in Syria and Hezbollah's capabilities represented strategic depth in the regional power struggle and a deterrent against Israel. In response to Israeli attacks and to the US assassination of Quds Corps commander Qasim Suleimani, Iran demonstrated its determination to stay in Syria through the contribution of its aligned militias to the 2020 battle for Idlib, thereby expanding, not reducing its Syrian "footprint." However, the exceptionally harsh impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the country may be forcing Iran to incrementally scale down its Syrian profile.

Conclusion

The post-ISIS Syrian battlefield is constituted by a resilient regime flanked by two foreign spheres of influence, which has led to a situation of semi-anarchy, in which precarious stability is maintained by a *balance of power* between the rival power centres. This has permitted some agreements on the "rules of the game" in which no side pushes too far against the interests of the other. This is compatible with a modicum of cooperation across the zones around the remnants of economic interdependencies between them. The current stalemate could evolve in several different directions. The most favourable scenario would be an agreement for territorial power decen-

> The coronavirus pandemic has hit all the players in the struggle for Syria exceptionally hard, such that it cannot be said to be to the advantage of any of them and is therefore most likely to contribute to freezing the conflict

tralization to the zones of influence under nominal Syrian sovereignty, which would enable cooperation across them and moves toward the country's reconstruction. The most likely scenario, however, is probably a frozen conflict in which parallel reconstruction efforts would be pursued in the zones, at the cost of solidifying the division of the country and the sacrifice of Syrian sovereignty to the patrons of the separate zones. The coronavirus pandemic has hit all the players in the struggle for Syria exceptionally hard, such that it cannot be said to be to the advantage of any of them and is therefore most likely to contribute to freezing the conflict. Not to be wholly ruled out is a breakdown in the "rules of the game" and a limited hot war between the rival powers.

References

HAMIDI, Ibrahim, "Damascus and the Kurds: Mutual Delusions," *Asharq al-Awsat* 6 August, 2018.

HASHEM, Ali, "Recapture of Iraq-Syria border point heralds new regional reality," *al-Monitor*, 19 June, 2017, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/iran-eastern-syria-tanf-militia-us-confrontation.html#ixzz4kd3gY1F3.

LUND, Aron, *Syria's Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict*, Stockholm: FOI, December 2018, pp. 23.

SELIGMAN, Lara and HIRSH, Michael, "Trump's 'Stunning' About-Face on Syria," *Foreign Policy*, 19 December, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/19/trumps-stunning-about-face-on-syria-islamic-state-isis-trooops/.