

Turning the tide? Developments in the fifth year of the Syrian civil war

The reporting on Syria in 2015 by European and American mainstream media has been dominated by the Islamic State and largely neglected the developments of the genuine Syrian civil war between the Syrian regime and the rebel groups. Only the military intervention of Russia raised international attention but its effects on the ground hardly have been analyzed. Yet, the past year has seen, in the shadow of the ISIS spectacle, some major changes on the battleground in Syria as well as on the international diplomatic scene that few had expected in 2014. These changes mean that 2016 could be the year that enables the Assad regime to end its international isolation and build the international framework and local conditions to survive after five years of civil war.

Turning the tide with Russian support

In spring 2015 Assad's forces and his key allies Hezbollah and Iran seemed exhausted and overstretched¹. The end of the past year had been marked by several offensives against the rebels, especially the recapture of the country's second largest city and economic hub Aleppo. The Syrian Arab Army has been diminished to a skeleton and hardly deployed to the battlefield's frontline due to the regime's mistrust towards Sunni recruits. Instead, locally recruited Syrians organized into a variety of militias headed by Assad-loyalists including businessmen, neighborhood strongmen, and tribal leaders dominate the battle field while army officers seem to supervise the action to Damascus though their influence and extent of control is diminishing². In addition, Hezbollah as well as Iranian forces were largely responsible for the gains in 2014. Assad's infamous special forces have lost much of their influence and gradually recruited more ordinary Syrians than regular soldiers. Yet, improved command and control structure as well as outside support on the side of rebels amplified the developments in spring and summer 2015.

The first blow came in March 2015 when a coalition of Islamist rebels captured Idlib City in the north and Bosra in the south of the country. In the weeks after, further strategic positions and towns in the north and the south fell into rebel control as well as to the Islamic State in the northeast¹. By June, the Syrian regime had suffered major losses of territory. It became clear that the regime was fighting on too many fronts with too few forces. On 26 July, President Assad surprisingly revealed the grim status of the Syrian regime in a speech on public television. In front of a frenetically cheering loyalist crowd he declared that "each part of Syria is precious and invaluable and each spot equals in its demographic and geographic importance all other spots" but, relativizing the latter by stating that "war has its conditions, strategies, and priorities"³. Assad went on explaining the recent setbacks by the armed forces and as a result that "vital areas that must be held as to prevent other areas from falling"⁴. The speech seemed as if the president was trying to prepare the Syrian assembled economic and political elite has been his economic and political backbone throughout the war as well as his popular base in front of their TVs that the current partition of Syria might be for good and the protection of "small Syria" should be made priority. The small or useful Syria solution focuses on preserving Damascus and its hinterland, the border area to Lebanon as well as the central corridor to the coastal areas. In addition, Assad admitted for the first time publicly that the armed forces were facing manpower shortage and that more participation of the Syrian population was required. The Syrian government had already published an amnesty for deserters⁴. While Assad again did not announce a general mobilization, he highlighted that other "civilian resources" such as "cars, machinery and facilities" might be required for the armed forces. The mobilization law, *qanoun al-taabia*, issued in 2011 provides the regime with such tools. However, total public mobilization remains highly unlikely as the

regime is aware that such a step would create panic and mass defection of its remaining popular base. Assad also publicly recognized for the first time Hezbollah's "important" and "effective" assistance³. Iran is believed to have been pushing for this shift in strategy as their forces including Hezbollah had suffered most from the spring and summer 2015. However, after the public acknowledgement of these uncomfortable realities, another key ally stepped in to turn the tide.

On September 30th 2015, Russian President Putin announced that Russia would conduct air strikes in support of the regime's fight against the Islamic State⁵. While Assad's forces hardly engaged in clashes with the Islamic State since the group took over vast territory in Syria in 2014⁶, also Russian air raids hit primarily rebel strongholds⁷. While European and U.S. media has focused on Putin's motivations, the interesting question is what effect Russian airstrikes had on the regime's ground control. In general, the Russian aid seemed to face the same challenges like the US-led airstrikes against ISIS: The airstrikes themselves are powerful and effective, but they will eventually remain useless without a ground force that is capable of holding the ground paved by the strikes⁸. Given the already described status of the ground forces, this still remains to be seen. Almost four months after the start of the Russian intervention, the regime's forces have not recaptured a single city that into rebel control in spring and summer 2015. That leads to sobering assessment of Russia intervention. While the Russian airstrikes have prevented a further and possible vital break of Assad's control, it has not improved the regime's grim status compared to August 2015.

Yet, at the time of writing the Russian air support seems to gain momentum and enable the regime to recapture territory in Aleppo. A successful assault would return the control of Syria's second largest city entirely back into the regime's hands. In addition, the regime is

also making progress on the southern front in Daraa province another rebel stronghold.

The rebels – dead leaders and disunity

Even if it is unclear whether the regime can hold the ground that Russian airplanes will prepare for them, the bombings will have a destructive effect on the armed opposition. Russian airstrikes caused major destruction of civilian infrastructure, food and medical facilities and struck military targets of the rebels, such as ammunition and weapon storages and of course, rebel leaders⁹. On Christmas day, an air strike killed, along with fellow rebel heads, Zahran Alloush, commander of the Jaysh al-Islam and military chief of the rebel umbrella group Islamic Front, in Eastern Gouta¹⁰. The region has been the scene of the 2013 chemical attack¹¹ and since then developed into one of the regime's most worrying rebel strongholds just kilometers east from Damascus city center. The area has been repeatedly under siege for months since 2013 and witnessed major airstrikes and barrel bombings¹².

Alloush has been defined as one of Syria's most influential rebel leader and would have played a key role in international negotiations (excluding the Islamic State and the Kurdish YPG)⁹. The effects of Alloush's death have not unfolded yet, but given his reputation and position as a top-ranking leader of the Islamic Front alliance, also his passing is likely to cause ripple effects on the rebel's quest for unity. One of the obstacles of the armed opposition has been the killing of their leaders and the subsequent breaking apart of the group. As rebel groups are more and more localized and built around the personality of its head, infighting erupts upon their deaths. After Abdelqader Saleh's death, his Tawhid Brigade fell apart and its fractions joined different major rebel groups. Also Hassan Abdoud, head of Ahrar Al-Sham, died along with fellow fighters in a bombing in September 2014 that basically decapitated the group's leadership¹³.

Neutralizing these key players has definitely a short-term, tactical advantage for the Syrian regime. The rebels' foothold in the east of Damascus has been breathing down the Assad's neck for a long time. But decapitating

the rebellion has also a broader effect but also a setback for the Syrian-Syrian negotiations and the rebels' leverage. Alloush was certainly to take one of the seats in the High Negotiations Committee that was agreed on during the Riyadh conference December 2015 and meant to prepare the Syrian (not Kurdish) opposition for Syrian-Syrian negotiations by January 2016 as described in the November 14 Vienna communiqué. A hand full of high-ranking rebel leaders is not enough to run the entire rebellion, but they have significant influence over the insurgency. Killing these leaders is unlikely to make fighters suspend their battle and abandon their weapons, but lead to further fracturing of the opposition and support for more radical, but stable groups such as Al-Qaeda or Islamic State.

The infighting and lack of unity among the armed opposition had been a constant obstacle since the beginning of the civil war¹⁴. Unstable and unstructured external support has exacerbated the infighting among rebels. In late spring 2015, reports emerged that the U.S. was in the process of vetting fighters in Syria to establish a group of moderate rebels of 5,400 per year¹⁵. The group was supposed to be formed in the north of Syria to provide a counterweight to both the Assad regime in Syria as well as radical groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. In September the same year, Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced the end of the program before it even had really started – a \$500 million failure in the U.S. goal to get a serious foothold in Syria without requiring major commitments of troops. Some of the already trained had handed their weapons to Jabhat al-Nusra, been killed, or were captured by the Islamic State leaving 4-5 fighters in the field¹⁶. Shortly after, the U.S. shifted to the Southern Front hoping that support to an already established rebel group would be more successful. A loose coalition of rebel units known as the FSA's Southern Front had been supervised and trained by a US-run Military Operation Center (MOC) based in Jordan. Since June, the Southern Front had been advancing in the south of the Syrian capital. Deraa, the origin of Syria's uprising had been encircled by rebels who got ready for the final offense. Yet, in mid-September 2015 the Southern Front suddenly ended its

campaign to seize Daraa after the offensive on the provincial capital became bogged down in heavy back-and-forth fighting¹⁶. Discord between the MOC and the rebels as well as cuts in funding of the operation have been named as reasons behind the setback. In addition, rebels have claimed that the major successes have been due to Jabhat al-Nusra and not the Southern Front.

Preserving the Syrian state while destroying the Assad regime?

Five years into civil war, the Syrian governmental and administrative system has proven to be more stable than most analysts predicted in 2011. Until this day, the Syria regime is apart from the area controlled by the Islamic State the only stable provider of salaries, public services, commodities and food¹⁷. Being this provider is vital for the survival of the Syrian Regime in the civil war. The case of Aleppo has been the most prominent example of failed attempts to create a strong, civil administrative system in the vacuum left by the Assad regime. After Western parts of Aleppo had been liberated in early 2014 by rebels, Opponents of the regime designed an effective and elected provincial council, and civil society groups assumed many of the roles and responsibilities carried out by the Assad regime¹⁸. The subsequent massive barrel bombing of Aleppo targeted mainly the areas in which rebels had established rebel administrative zones¹⁹.

As a result of this strategy, the large majority of the Syrian people remaining in Syria live in territories controlled by the regime. Given Syria's geography (already before the war) of vast desert areas and high concentration on the population in the Western and Coastal area, control of territory does not translate into control of people. After the regime's loss of territory in particular in the East, the Syrian government currently controls around 50 percent of the territory, but it rules between 55 and 72 percent of the population (10 - 13 million people) left inside Syria²⁰. Kurds control no more than 5 percent of the territory with 5-10 percent of the population (1-2 million people). The other 45 percent of Syrian territory cover only 17-34 percent of the population (3 - 6 million people) of which around 30 percent fall to the Islamic

State including the Eastern desert areas with a population of 2 to 3.5 million people (10–20 percent of the total populations). The rest of Syria's territory of around 15 percent of the total and between 1 million and 2.5 million people is controlled by different rebels factions like Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islam Army, and the various FSA factions. Yet, in these areas political control remains divided and shifting among the groups. But the regime has even made great efforts to hold lifelines of its state up even in territories it does not control any longer. State employees in territory held by rebels or the Islamic State often still received salaries by the state providing them with their only income.

These realities leave the Assad regime as the major supplier of public services and state's duties in Syria. Preserving the identity of Assad's regime and the Syrian regime and being the best option on the ground, an administrative system means also a major advantage of Assad's survival in the international negotiations. The Western powers worst nightmare is a repetition of the fatal failures of US Presidential Envoy to Iraq Paul Bremer's post-2003 Iraq plan²¹. The de-baathification of the Iraqi civil service and the disband of the Iraqi army created the circumstances for the subsequent insurgency that led the country into sectarianism, new autocratic government and finally to the formation of Al-Qaida in Iraq, which today constitutes for a major part the Islamic State. As a consequence, the Security Council's Road Map for Syria highlights for the future negotiations the need to keep the Syrian state institutions intact²². As Assad's regime remains the main if not the only actor that fulfills these services and duties, rebel representative will have little claim in being part of a post-war Syria or transitional government.

The proxy owners and international powers– lost in fear, operations or ambition

While there have been major developments on the Syrian battle field, in the past year, there has been also major strategic changes for the main regional proxies, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Gulf monarchy is the main supporter of the armed opposition in Syrian, foremost of the Islam Army. Just weeks after his inauguration in January 2015, Saudi De-

fence Minister Prince Mohammed al-Salman launched a Saudi-led intervention in Yemen after the Houthi rebels toppled President Abd-Rabu Mansour Hadi. Since then the Saudi army has deeply been involved in Yemen and there is no end in sight. Similarly the US-led campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia lacks a strong ally on the ground to exploit the aerial attacks. While the campaign in Yemen serves mainly domestic gains, benefited Salam's popularity²³ as well as his line in the royal family and created an opportunity to test Saudi Arabia air forces capability as well as the joint GCC military command set up in November 2014, it has certainly stressed Saudi Arabia possibilities to support its allies in Syria. While the campaign certainly trains human resources, it primarily forces the Saudi government to set financial priorities. The government expects the 2016 budget deficit to decline to 326 billion riyals (\$87 billion) from 367 billion in 2015. Governmental spending, which reached 975 billion riyals this year, is projected to drop to 840 billion. Revenue is forecasted to decline to 513.8 billion riyals from 608 billion riyals. This has already required the government to announce major cuts for subsidiaries of goods²⁴. The military quagmire Prince Salman has maneuvered Saudi Arabia into will constrain the country's leverage in the Syria War and hence is likely to weaken the opposition²⁵.

Also European and U.S. powers are unlikely to increase their support for the rebels in the short-term. The European Union has acted reluctantly and unambitious from the beginning of the Syrian crisis²⁴. In September 2015, Europe was caught offhand by a massive influx of mainly Syrian refugees that had been reported months earlier and had been forecasted by experts since 2012²⁶. In addition, several terror attacks by IS sympathizers and European foreign fighters including the November 11 suicide bombings and shootings in Paris have given rise to Islamophobia and far-right movements on the streets and in elections²⁷. These movements have been joined by far-left wing groups and adopted in parts sympathy and support for Russia. Fatigue and in need for a seemingly fast solution in the Syrian quagmire, European politicians are increasingly tending to accept a survival of the Assad regime. Prove for this

shift is that some European countries (in addition to the US, see below ISGS) have also begun to prioritize the fight against terrorism over the departure of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The increasing Salafi ideology among the opposition and fading moderate forces adds on to this tendency. The U.S. disastrous attempts to get a foothold in the Syrian quagmire have already been described. President Obama has been harshly blamed for his Middle East policy and in particular for not taking a more decisive approach in the Syrian civil war that led finally to the creation of the Islamic State²⁸. In 2016, one year ahead of Presidential elections it is unlikely that there will be major U.S. shift in strategy with regards to Syria. In general, for the Western powers it is not about the ideal solution in Syria anymore, but about the least-bad-option and face-saving.

On the international diplomatic level, 2015 finally brought one pragmatic progress. After the abortion of the Geneva II Conference on Syria in January 2015, newly appointed United Nations Special Envoy Staffen de Mistura started a new attempt to revive the negotiation process that had left the international community with low expectations for any process towards peace in Syria²⁹. After his predecessors Kofi Annan and Abdul Ahad Bahrami failed in a bottom-up as well as in a traditional top-down approach to lead negotiations between the different parties, de Mistura decided for a two track approach: one internal, among Syrians, and one external, among the nations having a stake in the war in Syria. The International Support Group for Syria (ISGS) composed by the veto powers in the Security Council as well as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Turkey, Germany and Iran met in Vienna in November 2015 to set the international framework for the talks between Syrians. The inclusion of Iran is a major breakthrough in years of negotiations. For the first time Assad's key ally and game changer Iran is included in an international negotiation body. Any process or negotiations on Syria are unrealistic without Teheran whose forces are the main reason why Assad's regime survived since 2012. However, the final communiqué of the Vienna conference has been a far cry from the initial high hopes for real change in Syria: The ISGS stood mostly with the already as unrealistic perceived goals of

previous transitional plans such as free and fair elections by 2017. In addition, the group claimed the goal that the institutions of the Syrian state should remain unharmed which provides much room for the Assad regime to maintain the major political stakeholder in any post-war Syria (as discussed earlier).

After setting the international track, the second, Syrian track of de Mistura's approach included the formation the representation of the Syrian opposition. The Syrian government appointed UN envoy Bashar al-Jaafari, the regime's long-term mouth piece as its representative. For this purpose Saudi Arabia provided a conference in Riyadh to form an opposition body to engage in eventually Syrian-Syrian talks with the government. The meeting included moderate Islamist, Salafi and secular armed rebels in Syria and abroad and was held in Riyadh in early December 2015 to define the delegation to be sent to Geneva. However, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS had been excluded in the first place from the meeting, even though it is unlikely that one of them had had an interest to join the process. Ahrar al-Sham had been invited but pulled out in the last minute from the meeting as did other smaller factions. A major group that has been excluded from the Riyadh meeting and therefore also from being part of the official opposition had been Syrian Kurds. The Turkish government raised major objections against a participation of Syrian Kurds whose major militia the YPG is a Syrian front of the Turkish PKK. Yet, several Syrian Kurdish groups formed a new umbrella body, the Council of Democratic Syria which did not decrease Turkish as well as American intention to exclude the group from joining the Riyadh meeting. At the same time, Russia pushed hard to include a list of persons on the list of the opposition to the conference that could hardly be described critical, some anti-regime enough that they are still living in Damascus. Both parts the Russia backed as well as Kurdish groups have as a compromise been invited as observers but not official representative of the opposition to Geneva. While this might be true for the Russia appointed individuals, the exclusion of the Kurds already show how deep the division of Syria is, even though Kurdish fighters have been heavily fighting the Islamic State as well as the regime. However, the

remaining groups that met in Riyadh were more broadly based and closer connected to the groups fighting on the ground than those of previous delegations in 2013 and 2014. The High Negotiations Committee (HNC) had been announced as the delegation body representing the Syrian opposition and headed by former Syrian prime minister Riyadh Hijab along with several other defected regime officials. By the time of the writing, the conference in Geneva that had already started with a delay and has once again been postponed until the end of February over the opposition's prerequisites for negotiations³⁰. The opposition demands the end of the siege to several Syrian cities, a ceasefire and the release of prisoners as preconditions for direct talks but the current bombings of Aleppo do show no intention of the Syrian regime to follow these demands. As the international pressure on the regime is currently so low to meet the demands, the talks currently fulfill the low expectations with which the started. Even if opposition and the regime engage in talks, around 80 percent of all anti-Assad groups fighting in Syria, Kurds, the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, are not part of the negotiations. It is hard to believe how this process should lead to a permanent ceasefire if external support by the proxies continuous and international pressure on Assad remains absent.

These developments around the Geneva III Conference on Syria have and will help Assad returning to the international stage where few would have believed him to be standing again three years ago. With strategic advice from Iran in some realpolitik, the Assad regime managed to reemerge through the international process that has been initiated four years ago with the goal to remove him from power. This again could put pressure on the rebels to focus on political unification in order to have a stance against Assad in negotiations. Yet, their chances of failure or loose in negotiations through the ISGS are higher than for Assad. In 2013, the regime seemed close to collapse with struggling to control city centers while rebels stabilized and improved their control and military structure in the surrounding country side. If there was ever a moment to play the card of Assad's departure from power it would have been there. Yet, the regime managed with a surge

in support by Iran and Hezbollah to turn the tide. As the political climate has changed in Europe and the US as well as Iran returning to the international stage while rebels are still divided and Turkey increasingly distracted by its own Syrian infection, there is few reason why there should be a real political transition in Syria even after 2017. Furthermore, Iran's economic and political role will further strengthen in 2016.

2016 - Another round of civil war or finally the end game?

While the Syrian civil war has seen shifting battle field momentums along its course, 2015 brought two major changes that could determine the mid-term transition of the Syrian civil war. First, the year 2015 brought the intervention of a major international power into the war with its own forces. Even though Russia is (until now and is unlikely to engage more) providing only air support, they were successful in stopping the setbacks of Assad's forces. Second, the international community considerable retreated from their "Assad-must-go" condition and opened up for a path the Syrian regime might be willing to negotiate on.

Hence, 2016 could be the year of Assad breaking through the international isolation. However, as the survival of the regime might be secured, the rally-around-the-flag logic that keeps the core of the regime stable might fall apart and individuals and groups Assad had to rely on will ask a price for their loyalty. Within 5-years of civil war, he had to share too much power, influence and control.

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Notes

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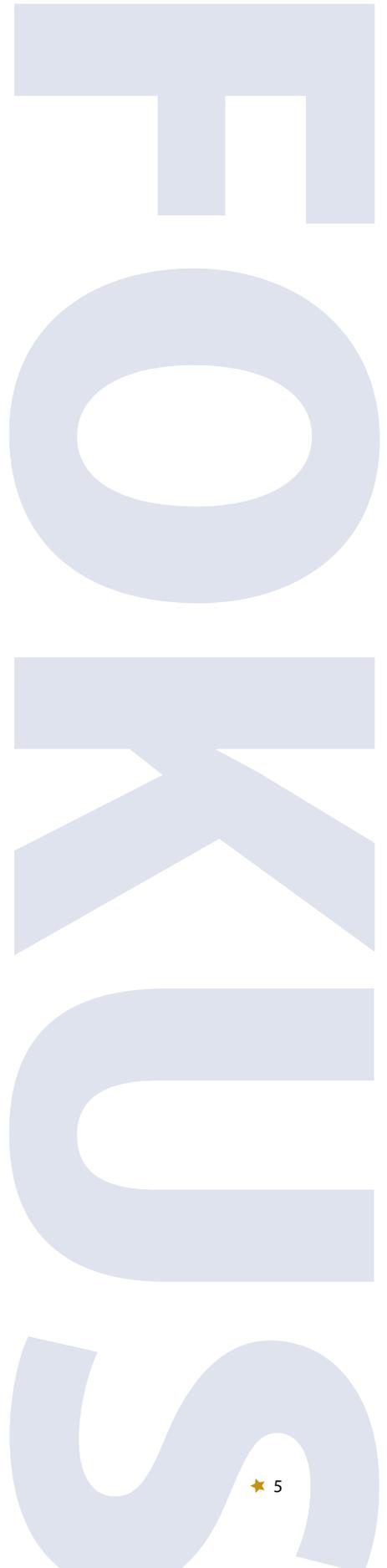
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