

# IRMO BRIEF

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## Endgame in Syria

*By Janko Bekić, PhD*

### Introduction

After seven years the war in Syria is nearing its completion, even though the result will almost certainly not be a decisive victory by either side, but rather a frozen conflict and unstable peace dictated by the regional and global powers embroiled in the conflict. From a political scientist's point of view, the most interesting feature of the war in Syria has been its gradual transformation from a failed revolution to oust president Bashar al-Assad and introduce democratic rule to a civil war between regime loyalists and a myriad of local as well as foreign Islamist factions, and from there to a war on terrorism concentrated on eradicating Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's murderous and enslaving Islamic State. In its last phase, starting in late 2017, the war in Syria has mutated into a textbook example of proxy warfare in which the exhausted belligerents are fully dependent on their external sponsors and fight mainly to

accomplish geopolitical interests and goals of outside actors.

### Battlefield survival by means of foreign aid

In order to stay in power, president Assad accepted Teheran's tutelage and turned most of Syria into a military base and training ground for the Islamic Republic. Presently, he is de facto sharing sovereignty over the territory under his control with Iran, but also with the allied non-state actor Hezbollah, which is no longer confined to Lebanon and presents a growing threat for the State of Israel. In exchange for Moscow's political and military assistance Assad has granted Russia long-term use of the Hmeimim air base in Latakia province and the naval base in Tartus, giving the Russian Federation invaluable access to the Mediterranean Sea (its only other option being the port city of Tobruk in

eastern Libya under the control of pro-Russian general Khalifa Haftar). While relinquishing his status as sovereign ruler of Syria, Assad has nonetheless successfully evaded the fate of Iraq's Saddam Hussein or Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and imposed himself as an important piece in the game of chess played by the regional and global powers.

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As the civil war dragged on and Iranian and Russian backing for Assad grew, the so-called "moderate opposition" disintegrated into countless political groupings and militias adhering – in various degrees – to the ideology of Sunni Islamism. The military advances of Syrian government and allied troops in 2017 and 2018 additionally separated the rebel forces, not only in terms of territory but also regarding political outlook and *raison d'être*. After the morally and strategically devastating loss of Aleppo in December 2016, the various Arab and Turkmen groups in the north-west corner of the country basically gave up the idea of overthrowing Assad and installing Islamic rule by democratic means in Syria, focusing instead on cementing their grip on the Idlib province and strengthening ties with neighboring Turkey – their principal benefactor. To this end they participated in the

Turkish-led operation "Euphrates Shield" against ISIS and the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which ended in March 2017 and was a relative success for Ankara, as well as in operation "Olive Branch", which lasted from January to March 2018 and finished with the military occupation of the ethnically Kurdish province of Afrin. Since then the miscellaneous anti-government armed groups in Syria's north-west cannot be regarded as anything else but as fellow travelers in Turkey's attempt to establish its own version of the Golan Heights buffer zone between the Euphrates river and the strategically vulnerable Turkish Hatay province. The remaining pockets of resistance against Assad's forces on the borders of Iraq and Jordan lack the crucial outside support enjoyed by those bordering Turkey and are therefore bound to be overrun by government troops or face relocation to Idlib.

The third relevant side in the Syrian conflict is the aforementioned SDF – a broad coalition of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian forces established in 2015 and enjoying cautious support by the US. The original goal of the groups merged under the SDF umbrella was the removal of Assad and the radical transformation of unitaristic and Arab-dominated Syria into a highly decentralized (con)federation politically and socially based on partly utopian ideas of direct democracy, women's liberation (in the sense of abolition of patriarchy) and workers' self-management. However, as it became clear that president Assad would remain in power, the SDF started cooperating with Damascus and is now looking to establish a multiethnic autonomous unit in Syria's north-east based on the abovementioned

values and serving as a motor of change for Syria as a whole. Unlike other belligerents in Syria, the SDF does not enjoy support by any regional powerhouse and instead is viewed as a threat by neighboring countries fearing Kurdish secessionism and leftist revolutionary movements in general. At the same time, the SDF has proven to be a capable fighting force determined at eradicating the Islamic State, which has secured them sympathy and benevolence by Western governments and the general public in Europe and America. Still, Turkey's staunch opposition to the creation of an autonomous unit on its southern border that would be co-administered by cadres with possible ties to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) compels Washington to carefully navigate between arming the SDF against ISIS and keeping Syrian government and allied troops at bay on one side, and not changing the power balance to the detriment of its volatile ally Turkey on the other.

### **Syria as a prize in the new scramble for the Middle East**

The near future of Syria has mostly been decided on a series of trilateral meetings between Iran, Turkey and Russia, with the United States acting as an outsider too powerful to be completely ignored. US withdrawal from north-eastern Syria would almost certainly prompt a large-scale invasion of Turkish Armed Forces in collaboration with local Arab and Turkmen militias aimed against the SDF and its civilian sympathizers. The routing of rebel pockets in central Syria by troops loyal to the government has already set in motion a sizable

transfer of unconciliatory segments of the Sunni Arab population towards rebel-held Idlib, Turkish-controlled Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarabulus and newly captured Afrin, which is – according to different reports – experiencing an exodus of local Kurds combined with the settlement of Arabs from central Syria. So far there can be no talk of systematic ethnic cleansing, however, a population exchange of considerable proportions cannot be denied either. It is also predictable that a Turkish-led invasion of the SDF-controlled area between the Euphrates river and the Iraqi border would bring about an even larger movement of people, possibly triggering a new wave of migration towards Europe. Whatever the implications, Moscow's recent course suggests that Russia would give the go-ahead for such an adventure, as it is callously exploiting the widening rift between Ankara and Western capitals in order to neutralize the fact that Turkey is still a NATO member country. From the point of view of Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish control over the entire northern strip of Syria would be advantageous from both the military strategic perspective as well as from the vantage point of neo-Ottoman foreign policy.

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The SDF is neither manned nor equipped to withstand a large-scale Turkish attack, especially in a surrounding of mainly flat land and open space where guerilla tactics are ineffectual. Therefore, it is imperative for the United States to remain present with “boots on the ground” in north-eastern Syria until a political settlement has been reached and the creation of a Kurdish-Arab-Assyrian autonomous unit has been sanctioned by Damascus. An untimely departure of US forces would create a power vacuum and motivate Iran and Turkey to invade and share the spoils, with Teheran concentrated on securing the oil and gas fields in eastern Deir ez-Zor province and Ankara focused on controlling the northern strip of Syria along its border. Such an outcome would not only be a political and humanitarian catastrophe for Syrian Kurds and a derision of their collective effort to defeat ISIS, but it would also deprive the United States, and the West, of any influence over post-conflict state building in Syria. In other words, it would surrender the country to the Putin–Erdoğan–Rohani *troika* which is currently negotiating the demarcation of Middle Eastern spheres of influence after the demise of ISIS, a deal that doesn’t seem all too different from the much-criticized Sykes–Picot Agreement of 1916.

### **The issue of Manbij and Al-Tanf**

Two bits of Syrian soil are still unaccounted for: the SDF-held northern city of Manbij with its surroundings and the Al-Tanf military base and border crossing to Iraq, run by US forces and the so-called “Vetted Syrian Opposition”. An ISIS stronghold for two and a half years, Manbij was liberated by the SDF in August 2016 and has been administered by the Manbij City Council

ever since. The city was Erdoğan’s proclaimed goal during the “Euphrates Shield” operation but managed to stay outside of his grip due to a clever tactical maneuver involving SDF and Syrian government troops, but also Russian and US military “advisers” and “observers”. The president of Turkey is bent on capturing Manbij and has even threatened the US troops stationed in the city with an “Ottoman slap”. Presently, negotiations are under way between Washington and Ankara and will most likely result in a combined US-Turkish force securing the area, with civilian affairs remaining in the hands of the Manbij City Council. The SDF is expected to yield and cross to the other side of the Euphrates but it will certainly capitalize on this concession elsewhere in Syria.

The Al-Tanf military base and border crossing in south-eastern Syria wouldn’t be more than a chunk of desert were it not situated on the shortest and fastest route between Baghdad and Damascus, making it strategically vital for Iran and its geopolitical push towards the Mediterranean. The US is well aware of this and has kept a military outpost there since early 2016. The base was originally used as a launching pad for operations against ISIS, but it has lost this function due to the gradual collapse of the terrorist group and is now maintained in order to restrain the growing Iranian ambitions. On several occasions US and allied Syrian rebel forces clashed with Syrian government troops trying to advance towards the base, inflicting heavy casualties on Assad’s army. Even though the reports on negotiations regarding Al-Tanf have been scarce and inconclusive, it can be expected that the US will eventually vacate the military site and the rebels will be relocated to Idlib. Similar to the

Manbij case, the US will use the departure from Al-Tanf as a bargaining chip in the future.

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### **Conclusion - Assad's partial victory**

As the rebels' lines of defense collapse rapidly in the south of Syria without any major outcry by the international media (long gone are the days of the #SaveAleppo campaign), it becomes clear that the revolution has failed and the opposition – democratic, islamist or otherwise – has lost the civil war. However, Assad's victory is only partial: he is most likely to lose the north-west corner of the country to a rogue entity that will be kept afloat by neighboring Turkey and remain outside the system of international law for an unpredictable period of time, quite similar to the Israel-occupied

Golan Heights or the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. In addition, it seems that Damascus will be forced to reach some kind of autonomy agreement with the Kurdish–Arab–Assyrian coalition holding sway over the territory to the east and north of the Euphrates. The two parts of the country will be highly dependent on each other, with the autonomous unit in possession of the largest oil and gas fields in the country and the central government controlling the ports necessary for their export. Furthermore, Assad will have lost more than just territory; he is already fully dependent on Iran and Russia – two outside (non-Arab) actors with the ability to shape every strategic decision made by the Syrian government. There is also the issue of Hezbollah, a zealous anti-Israel terrorist group that has established a firm foothold in Syria during the war and could easily trigger future Israeli incursions. All in all, a heavy price to be paid for maintaining limited power in a country that was on the brink of destruction.

*DISCLAIMER: The views presented in this paper are solely of the author and do not represent an official position of the Institute for Development and International Relations or of the Hanns Seidel Foundation.*

# IRMO

Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose  
Institute for Development and International Relations

Institute for Development and International  
Relations - IRMO

Lj. F. Vukotinovića 2, Zagreb, Croatia

[www.irmo.hr](http://www.irmo.hr)



Hanns Seidel Stiftung

Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia

[www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr](http://www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr)