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War in Syria

UN peacekeeping mission and deal with Russia are imperative

Esther Meininghaus \ BICC

Recommendations

\ NATO member states should force Turkey to withdraw from northern Syria

NATO member states should expel Turkey from membership unless, it withdraws its troops from Syria. To secure the northern border, the UN could offer the immediate deployment of troops to Afrin, which could be extended to a Grand Bargain for other opposition-controlled areas. This deal would have to include Russia.

\ *Grand Bargain*: Develop a Joint Mechanism for the deployment of UN blue helmets and negotiations with Russia for a political solution to the war

Provided that major alliances among the armed opposition consent, shared responsibility for protection by the UN and Russia provides an opportunity for ceasefires, the deployment of UN blue helmets, a reformed state system without Assad and deradicalization programmes. It could be achieved through a Grand Bargain.

\ If Russia were to act as a mediator, it must stop current systematic attacks on civilians immediately

If Russia is to change its role from an aggressor to that of a mediator, the attacks in eastern Ghouta, Idlib, Hama countryside and elsewhere must stop with immediate effect.

\ Deradicalization as a means of terror prevention requires cooperation between Russia and the United Nations

The strategic forced relocation of radical fighters by the regime alliances to areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), for instance, leads to local populations being terrorized. Growing poverty and financial incentives draw fighters towards extremist groups. Expertise by Russia and the United Nations must be combined to develop and implement de-radicalization programmes if further escalation of terror is to be stopped locally and globally.

\ Donors should continue and coordinate support for the moderate Syrian opposition on the diplomatic level

The moderate civil-political opposition, e. g. Higher Negotiation Committee should be a key actor to shape political reform in the Grand Bargain and to create an internationally acceptable democratic and inclusive framework. Donors should, therefore, continue the financial and ideational support of the opposition. This support, however, ought to be coordinated and allow for self-determined prioritisation of needs (e.g. legal advice, negotiation training).

UN peacekeeping mission and deal with Russia are imperative

War trends: International security interests are prioritized

In the Syrian war, which began in 2011 with protest for democratic participation and against the autocratic regime, original grievances continued to be sidelined over the past year. The media focused on the fight against Daesh (the Islamic State, IS), which in Syria is being carried out by the US-led international coalition as well as the regime alliance (Syria, Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah). An estimated several hundred opposition groups, which are highly heterogeneous, continued to face the challenge of having to fight on two fronts against the regime and Daesh. With the exception of the US, member states of the international alliance have not been willing to deploy troops on the ground. Instead, they expected Syrian opposition groups to withdraw their troops fighting against the regime alliance to fight Daesh, yet without offering them support for their cause in return. In the fight against Daesh, international security interests are being prioritized, while local populations remain exposed to attacks without protection, and original grievances continue to be ignored.

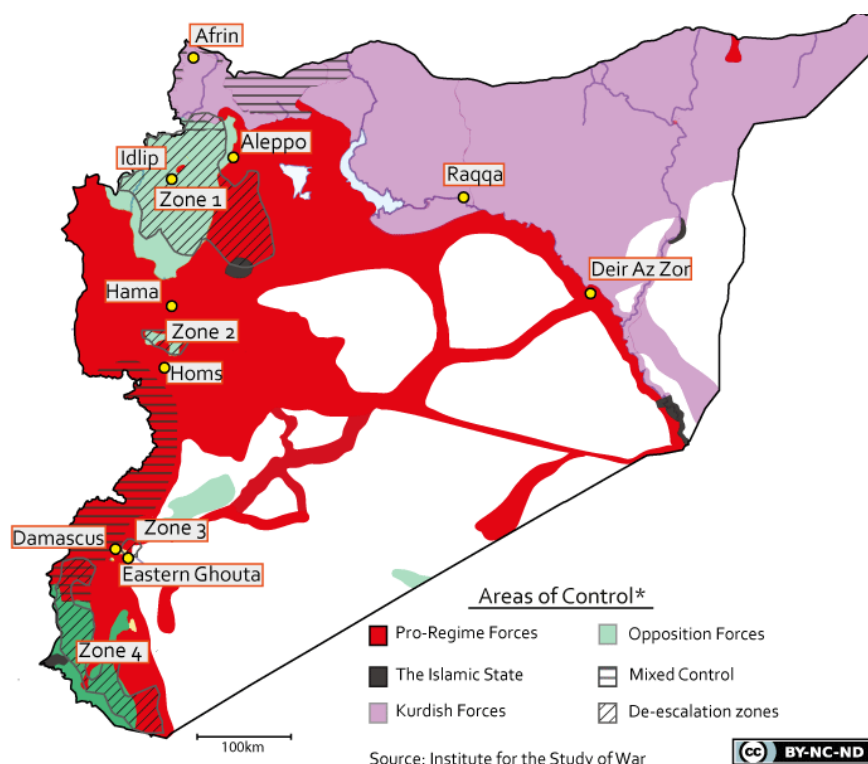
Failing de-escalation zones and forced relocation

The impression that fighting decreased over the past year is a misconception that results from a lack of media attention and data. In February 2018, the United Nations warned that the war has become extreme—worse than Kosovo ever was (Barnard, 2018). Progress allegedly made with the introduction of de-escalation zones was largely on paper only and diverted attention from escalating violence elsewhere. Even the de-escalation zones are now being attacked continually as is the case with eastern Ghouta, causing the deaths of scores of civilians on a daily basis. Standard measures of conflict do not exist. Given that casualties have not been counted since 2014 and hospitals are targeted, only partially functional, understaffed and out of reach in many locations, no figures on direct or indirect victims of war are available. The Syrian regime continues to refuse permission for UN

observers, and travel bans and a lack of security continue to impede independent journalism. The war is rendered almost invisible.

Weekly analyses of fighting, limited media reports and data on the humanitarian situation, however, show a different trend. The de-escalation zones, which allegedly contributed to appeasement, remained without effect. In the course of the Astana-negotiations initiated by Russia from May 2017 onwards, Russia, Iran and Turkey declared their intention of implementing four de-escalation zones in Syria with various guaranteeing powers. Their stated goals were to reduce fighting, ensure access to humanitarian aid and to isolate fighters of Daesh and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly the Nusra Front)—both categorized as terrorist organizations—from other armed groups in order to fight these networks. De-escalation zones were announced for parts of the governorates of Daraa and Qunaytra (July 2017), eastern Ghouta in rural Damascus (July), northern rural parts of the governorate of Homs (August) and Idlib as well as parts of Latakia, Hama and Aleppo (September). These have only been implemented partially. Eastern Ghouta is still in its third year under siege and, like Idlib, has been subjected to heavy aerial bombardment by the regime alliance since the beginning of the year. De-confliction zones were introduced e.g. for Afrin in the governorate of Aleppo—now seeing the invasion of Turkish troops facing Syrian Armed Forces—and eastern Qalamoun in rural Damascus. These zones served to avoid direct clashes between the United States and Russia. Nonetheless, they could not prevent the most recent Russian casualties caused by US attacks in Deir al-Zur (Feb. 2018). Especially the offensive launched by the regime alliance in Idlib—alleged de-escalation zone—since late last year, the Turkish invasion in northern Syria, and current aerial attacks on eastern Ghouta show a new climax in the escalation of violence which had built up over the past year.

The overall humanitarian situation has deteriorated further. Even after attempts of implementing de-escalation zones, UN access to people in need, of



whom 13.5 million depend on humanitarian aid, remains severely restricted. Only about five per cent of targeted recipients were reached in hard-to-reach areas. In areas under siege, access decreased from 13 to six per cent. Among 6.3 million internally displaced persons, 1.8 million were newly displaced in 2017 (2016: 2.0 million). This is a further indication of the fact that levels of violence have hardly changed. In addition to people fleeing from fighting, the number of people who became victims of organized and systematic displacement increased drastically. The regime alliance forcefully relocated about 33,000 people alone from al-Wa’er and through the so-called Four Town Agreement (Fu’ah, Kefrayya, Zabadani und Madayya).

The United Nations is no party to these relocations, officially considered evacuations, “which do not appear to meet international legal standards or adhere to humanitarian principles (UNSC, 2017). Given the blockade of the Security Council by Russia and China, however, this critique is without consequences. The

international community remains helplessly paralyzed in spite of relentless aerial and ground attacks on civilian targets such as residential areas, hospitals, schools and basic infrastructure by the regime alliance; the sarin gas attack on Khan Shaykhoun, proven to have been launched by the regime and other chemical attacks, recently also with napalm; satellite imagery on mass executions in Sednayya prison and forced disappearances of an estimated 85,000 men, women and children. Although war crimes have also been proven for other belligerents, the majority of cases have been committed by the regime alliance.¹

Consequently, de-escalation and de-confliction zones have not improved the situation of civilians at large. Instead, they allowed for the regime alliance to shift troops to strategically relevant fronts. Despite their

1 \ For example, 90 per cent of sieges are still being carried out by pro-regime forces. These are estimated to be responsible for the same share of cases of enforced disappearances. Cf. e.g. Syrian Network for Human Rights (2017).

disagreement on the future of the country, the regime alliance and the US-led international alliance against Daesh (including NATO) seemingly share the goal of defeating Daesh. However, recapturing territory from Daesh has also been a race for expanding control between the regime alliance and opposition groups, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in particular.

Increasing radicalization

The conquest of Mosul in Iraq (July 2017), of the cities of Raqqa (by the Kurdish-dominated SDF, Oct.) and Deir al-Zur (by pro-regime forces, Nov.) and the surrounding areas are signs of Daesh's defeat. In total, 25,000-60,000 fighters were killed. Yet, various agreements on safe conduct for IS fighters and their families show that belligerents have no demobilization programmes for Islamist extremists in place, who are either killed or knowingly left in the region. More than in the case of Daesh, this concerns fighters of HTS, which is a former al-Qaida affiliate. In 2017 alone, the regime alliance forcefully relocated several thousand HTS fighters and their families to Idlib. This strategy exposes local civilians to forced recruitment and a daily life characterized by radicalism. Despite persistent reports on human trafficking, slavery and forced marriages among IS and HTS fighters, their "families" are being forcefully relocated along with them without any checks.

The regime alliance is thus catalyzing radicalization by provoking a high presence of extremist groups in Idlib as an FSA stronghold, but also in other opposition-held parts of the country. This leads to clashes with other Salafist-jihadist groups, but also with the moderate opposition, which is weakened as a result. HTS now dominates Idlib also by having taken over its elected city council, which had been running Idlib's civil administration since August 2017, by force. The regime alliance thus consciously incites fighting within opposition-held areas. Months ago, it thus started creating a pretext for the present major offensive as a "fight against terror", which had been mounted with aerial bombardment and ground attacks on Idlib since February 2018. In that same

period, the moderate opposition was further marginalized by the suspension of the CIA train-and-equip programme, which had supported the FSA with salaries, training and equipment.² In southern Syria, moderate groups have been victims of targeted attacks. These include assassinations of prominent civil and military personalities by the regime alliance, Daesh and HTS. Furthermore, moderate groups now also dispose of even fewer resources that would help prevent the defection of fighters to extremist groups. Given an acute poverty rate of 69 per cent, people also defect because of the sheer necessity of securing income. In some of its affiliate groups, the FSA is confronted with growing radicalization. After the United States conditioned further support to the FSA with the demand for a unified alliance of fighters in northern Syria, the Syrian interim government of the opposition announced in September that it formed a Syrian National Army. The latter is estimated to include about 22,000 fighters (Dec. 2017).

The regime's Syrian Armed Forces have been severely weakened. They are dependent on the Russian Air force and ground troops by Hezbollah and Iranian-led Afghan and Iraqi militias. Nonetheless, the regime alliance benefitted from the US-led intervention against Daesh, which allowed the regime alliance to focus on its battle against the opposition. The latter was in turn weakened by having to dispatch ground troops for the fight against Daesh. Due to a border agreement between Jordan, Russia and the United States (July 2017), Iran and Hezbollah were seemingly forced to withdraw fighters from a 55km corridor along the southern border. However, they retained their presence through affiliated militias. On the northern and eastern borders, Turkey had vehemently opposed collaboration between the United States and the SDF because the latter includes the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considers to be a terrorist group due to its links with the Turkish PKK. Turkey suggested to the United States two alternative plans for recapturing Raqqa without SDF involvement, which the United States rejected. In

2 \ At the time, the United States and Western donors understood „moderate“ groups to be secular groups. A published study on current categorisations is yet to be made available. Cf. Small Arms Survey (2016).

January 2018, the United States stated its intention to deploy 30,000 fighters along the Turkish border jointly with the SDF (Wintour, 2018). This provoked the Turkish invasion in northern Syria, which aims to “annihilate” YPG fighters.

Overall, opposition groups still control about one-third of Syrian territory. This evaluation of key trends since 2017 shows that the implementation of de-escalation zones and reconstruction deals, also contemplated by the European Union, by the regime alliance are premature. On the contrary, violence is escalating. Short-lived media attention on Afrin reveals that inner-Syrian developments now only capture international attention if, as in the case with Turkey being a NATO member state and partner of the “refugee deal”, these concern major Western interests.

Peace negotiations are at risk due to marginalization of the opposition

On the diplomatic level, the Syrian opposition is at risk of losing relevance. This development endangers the creation of a strong vision for a future Syria supporters of the opposition could also identify with, and which would thus be crucial to ending conflict and restoring peace. After decades of oppression within Syria, a varied political opposition has emerged in exile over the past years, often with external support. Various groups and umbrella organizations, such as the Higher Negotiations Committee and its sub-groups, have organized themselves and are working towards political programmes for a future Syria. Others, such as the Damascus Declaration affiliates, were founded in Syria long before the war. Also, new local political opposition groups emerged throughout the war and in many areas still seek to persist.

The UN-led Geneva negotiations aim for a political solution of the conflict with the participation of some of these groups, but these negotiations have been weakened when Russia, Iran and Turkey introduced parallel negotiations in Astana in spring 2017. These primarily targeted armed actors while intending to negotiate ceasefires for de-escalation zones. Russian

dominance extending to the diplomatic level has further divided the opposition. It is not feasible for all groups to attend both strands of negotiations due to limited time and resources. Furthermore, both processes pursue different goals, which has also prompted boycott. Astana sought to draw armed actors away from Geneva, which served to side-line the civil-political opposition and the United Nations. Sochi’s new committee on constitutional reform, which competes with the Geneva talks, leads to further marginalization.

International donors, including the German Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, spent years supporting the political opposition in democracy-oriented self-organization, training and legal advice. If a future peace agreement were to have legitimacy also for opposition-held areas, the support for civil-political groups on the ground and in exile must be continued. Competing donor interests, as can be observed presently, must instead be coordinated. Civil-political groups must be able to determine their activities so that they can develop political programmes that are in line with local needs and that can make a substantial contribution to shaping the country’s future.

Urgency and feasibility of interventions by NATO and the United Nations

Present attacks by the regime alliance on Idlib and eastern Ghouta and the Turkish invasion in the north have escalated the war further. While the regime alliance continues to carry out targeted attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, NATO member states should take a clear position for the protection of civilians and to prevent a further rise in radicalization that represents a global threat. Humanitarian aid is essential, but it does not protect civilians against systematic attack and death. The Turkish invasion has created a situation that requires action. It also opens a window of opportunity for a multilateral *Grand Bargain*, which could be negotiated in four partially parallel steps.

First, NATO should make Turkey's continued membership in the alliance conditional on internal reforms and the withdrawal of troops from northern Syria. This is necessary to prevent further escalation of violence with which Turkey targets YPG, PKK and affiliated fighters, which are estimated at 60,000 in Syria alone.³ Although the SDF provided large numbers of troops for ground battles for the international alliance against Daesh led by the United States, the latter do not seem to withstand Turkish pressure and appear unwilling to defend the SDF. Fighting between Turkish and SDF troops risks high numbers of casualties. The conflict also risks extending to the Kurds in Iraq, a country that is already highly unstable. Although Russia has so far tolerated Turkey's presence, the regime alliance have moved ground troops to the north. The question whether conflict will also escalate between Turkey and the regime alliance in the north will also depend on how currently rising tensions between Hezbollah in the country and Israel develop in the south. To prevent further escalation, it is imperative that Turkey withdraw.

Second, the United Nations could offer the deployment of blue helmets to Afrin to protect civilians and end hostilities. This would allow to separate forces. It would respond to Turkey's perceived need to secure Afrin and stop further clashes between Turkey, the SDF and the regime alliance. Furthermore, it would normalize multilateral UN involvement and if successful can be extended to other areas.

Third, the offer of expanded blue helmet deployment could serve as an entry point for an end to the war that could be negotiated politically. This requires, primarily, the consent of large alliances of armed opposition groups, such as the FSA and SDF. Given the scale of atrocities committed by the regime alliance, their agreement is uncertain. However, it is in their interest to prevent further loss of territory and attacks on civilians by the regime alliance provided that they are granted their central demand, i.e. political participation. If hopes for such an agreement are meant to be realistic, these will necessitate

enforceable guarantees, a self-determined, participatory and transparent set-up of the new state system, the abdication of Assad, and jointly agreed and implemented security sector reform and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of fighters.

Fourth, this approach would require Russia's agreement. Although Russia has supported Assad's presidency thus far, the present situation shows that an end to the war may be unattainable for decades to come, while the numbers of Russian casualties are rising and the risk of terror attacks in Russia is growing, as the IS attack in Dagestan of February 2018 shows. The past seven years have shown that this war cannot be won militarily, and neither can it defeat terrorism, as the failure of de-escalation zones, renewed violence and increasing radicalization show. Russia and the regime alliance do not possess the capacities to secure territorial gains in the long-term, or to implement deradicalization and demobilization programmes that are necessary to halt and reverse the current trend towards Islamist radicalization. The deaths of more than 200 Russian mercenaries since the beginning of 2018 show that the war is increasingly claiming Russian lives. Force alone will not allow for sustainable peace in the middle of a highly volatile region, let alone the return of refugees who had fled war and political persecution. To allow return, original grievances rooted in the country's dictatorship need to be resolved, and a political solution must be found. Russia would be made responsible for protection in regime-controlled areas, and its approval is needed for blue helmet deployment for opposition-held areas, but the latter would have to exclude Russian soldiers.

The suggested combination of Turkish withdrawal and the deployment of blue helmets also serves Turkish interests if it assures further NATO membership, secures Afrin, avoids clashes with the regime alliance and ensures that the Kurds remain part of the Syrian state instead of pursuing further autonomy. Their declared intent to become part of a federal Syrian state might help this approach.

³ \ Reliable figures are not available. Cf. Perry (2016).

The United Nations and Russia would thus have to jointly act as guarantors for state reform, deradicalization and demobilization. If Russia was to be won for this, the Security Council blockade would be resolved to pave the way for a UN mandate. Russia would have to be willing to end its alliance with the current regime, which would have to be replaced by a mixed transition government. This joint responsibility would require detailed mechanisms and division of labour in overseeing these processes in different parts of the country. This approach has never been implemented before and necessitates comprehensive consultations with expert commissions to develop the exact mandate, set-up and sanction mechanisms for such an agreement in close collaboration with local military and civil-political groups, such as those represented in the peace negotiations, on all sides.

Such an approach holds significant risks. It must be expected that current tensions among NATO member states, the United States and Russia would seriously impede trust building. For Russia and UN member states, there is the danger that either party may break agreements and potentially expose blue helmets and Russian security forces to attack. Also, experience in developing deradicalization programmes is still limited (Nigeria, Somalia). This makes the likelihood of their success difficult to gauge. Extremist groups are likely to refuse participation in such a deal and will try to undermine it with further attacks. It is further unclear how foreign Shiite militias and Iran would respond. However, these are effectively dependent on the Russian Air force, and with that on their presence being tolerated by Russia.

At the same time, non-intervention by the United Nations equally carries great risks of a further escalation of the war in the region especially with the involvement of Turkey, Iraq, Iran/Hezbollah and Israel. In contrast, an agreement between Syrian fighting parties, Russia and the United Nations would represent the opportunity for a multilateral peace agreement and the protection of local civilians. NATO, the United Nations and Russia would benefit from the

de-escalation of current tensions and joint action to prevent a further expansion of global terror. Germany, NATO and the United Nations could re-establish their credibility in the region by offering not words, but action to protect civilians from genocide and politicide and to protect human rights. This, too, is essential for a long-term strategy of terror prevention. Finally, for Syria, there might be a chance of an end to the war.

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