

Update from Peter Ford, Former British Ambassador to Syria

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On the surface little has changed in Syria since last Summer. Military stalemate in the North, the corona crisis and administration change in Washington have ensured that nothing major could occur to end the conflict in Syria, which has now passed the ten year mark. Below the surface however rumblings portending change have never been far away. Overshadowing all are the dire economic situation, brought about in large part by sanctions, the imminent Presidential elections in Spring, and the prospects for the US/Iran relationship.

The North

Following territorial gains mostly in southern Idlib last March the Syrian government now control about 70% of the country. Heavy Turkish intervention, using devastating drone attacks, halted last year's advance, produced a cease-fire of sorts, and ensured no further significant advances by the Syrian Arab Army. Some tidying up of ragged front lines has taken place, with the Turks recently removing some military outposts marooned in government-controlled territory, but this does not appear to betoken any more general Turkish retreat. Rather the contrary, with de facto Turkish administration putting down more and more roots in the border area. Turkish post offices, colleges and clinics are only the most obvious signs of the new Ottoman presence, alongside use of the Turkish lira. Parallels with Northern Cyprus are only too obvious.

Behind this Turkish shield in much of the border area Turkish-controlled militias including a rump of the Free Syrian Army with their attendant 'Autonomous Administration' and local councils tax and administer a weary local population, many of them Turkmen, who used to be one of the minorities which flourished under the secular tolerant rule of Damascus before the conflict. If and when these areas return to the bosom of the state the situation can only be like that which prevailed in France after the removal of Vichy. The same applies in spades to the Kurdish-controlled areas (see below). Many Kurds, by the way, have been ethnically cleansed from the Turkish-controlled areas, storing up even more problems for the future.

In Idlib the security situation is chaotic. The dominant Sunni Arab Salafi militia, Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham (HTS), continues to rule the roost, occupying itself mainly with plunder and fighting with smaller jihadi groups, some, unlike itself, openly affiliated to Al Qaida. HTS has been trying without much success to distance itself from Al Qaida, with its leader Al Julani doing walkabouts recently sporting a suit. The speculation is that HTS is trying to position itself for an endgame whereby a semi-autonomous Idlib might emerge from a general settlement. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which Damascus would accept any such arrangement.

In the North East US forces estimated varyingly at 600 to 2,000 act effectively as human shields behind which US-endorsed Kurdish militia leaders rule an area representing a quarter of Syria, with its rich resources of oil and grain. As long as these modest US forces remain ensconced it would be suicidal for the Syrian Arab Army to attempt to advance, for that would be to trigger massive bombing reprisals by the USAF.

The Kurdish militia leaders run the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces ('Qasd', to use the Arabic acronym) who are peshmerga with a leavening of Arab forces, especially in the predominantly tribal areas in the south and east. Reports suggest many of these Arab forces, some of them ironically guarding US-controlled oil production facilities, are 'Qasdi by day, ISIS by night'. The displacement camps for ISIS families in the US/Kurdish areas, some as big as large towns, are incubating areas for ISIS. The biggest camp, Al Hol, with its 65,000 inhabitants, is well on the way to becoming the Kandahar of Syria.

More ISIS shelter in the no go area of Al Tanf - no go that is for Syrian government forces. Al Tanf is an enclave which straddles the borders of Syria, Jordan and Iraq, controlled by a couple of hundred US forces whose mission is to equip, train and direct the local jihadi armed group, Maghawir Al Thawra, and deny to Syria a strategic border crossing. The US and its allies complain that the Syrian government does not allow food into this remote and barren area crawling with its enemies. There is nothing to prevent supply from Iraq, but that would require the US to accept some responsibility for a situation entirely of its making.

It is reported that ISIS elements basing themselves either in Al Tanf or from close by have sallied forth in recent weeks to carry out a spate of ambushes and assassinations in the central desert, the Badia, south of Deir Ez Zor. These sporadic attacks by ISIS are some way from amounting to a strategic threat but they are increasing and a stretched Syrian Arab Army along with its Iranian and Russian allies is facing a challenge containing a resurgent ISIS.

In another twist to a messy situation in the East not all is well in the Kurdish camp. The parent Kurdish politico-military body, the PKK, is less happy with US client status than the Qasdi warlords, and more inclined to seek accommodation with the Syrian government. Not unnaturally, the government is thought to be playing on these tensions, and on Kurdish – Arab tensions. Astonishingly, the government still holds enclaves within the two largest predominantly Kurdish towns, Hasakah and Qamishli – enclaves which were recently starved of food supplies by the Kurds allegedly in response to pressure the government were putting on Kurdish areas near Aleppo. Throw into the mix regular Turkish threats to attack the Qasd, Russo-Turkish military patrols, Iranian militias bearing the brunt of the desert fight against ISIS, Iran recruiting hundreds of Syrians in the North East into Iranian-controlled militias, and US military convoys being stoned in Arab villages and it will be clear that the situation in the North East and East is potentially a powder keg. It is likely that the central government, having no alternative if it wishes to regain access to its own fuel and grain, will step up its efforts to exploit fissures and points of weakness. The US, for its part, seems to see the de facto occupation as low cost, painless (for itself) and productive in terms of denying Assad and Russia a success and causing Iran problems. These assumptions are likely to be challenged as time goes on.

Given the near stalemate on most fronts the government have stood down a considerable part of the army, a popular move with families long deprived of productive sons.

Israel has continued and even stepped up its constant unprovoked bombing raids on Syria, ostensibly targeting Iranian forces but often hitting Syrian military and civilians. Israeli chutzpah has been taken to such extremes that the Russians, who have long indulged the Israelis in their behaviour, have reportedly begun to allow Iran to bring in shipments of equipment via the Russian airbase at Humaymen. This is presumably to bring the Israelis back

to the undeclared rules of engagement (no targeting of Syrians) rather than to establish a permanent arrangement.

The economy

The economic situation is truly dire. Some data to illustrate:

- The cost of a food basket of staples has risen 247% in a year. Overall annual inflation is running at 180-200%.
- 4.8 million people depend on food handouts from the World Food Programme (WFP)
- Cotton production is down by a third owing to shortages of seeds, fuel and fertiliser
- For the first time in 31 years Syria is having to import dairy cows, due in part to disease and unavailability through sanctions of veterinary medicines.
- Out of eleven power stations only seven are operational owing to unavailability of gas and spare parts (most of Syria's natural gas is in the US/Kurdish area). Sanctions prevent Siemens, Ansaldo and Mitsubishi from providing spares.

It's not all bad news. Aleppo Airport is now open for international flights. Work on reconstructing the market centre of Homs has begun, with the participation of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). It had been held up by the unwillingness of many shopkeepers to return to their properties, forcing the government to issue possession orders (and thus be criticised for confiscation by human rights organisations).

Political

Presidential elections, according to electoral law, are due to take place between 16 April and 16 May. While the result may seem a foregone conclusion President Assad will want his re-election to be as convincing as possible. (He has not yet confirmed he will stand but this is taken as a given.) This consideration alone will likely dictate a reluctance to embark in the short term on any major risky military action, to retake Idlib, for example. The partial demobilisation also fits into this picture.

Negotiations

More rounds of desultory discussion have taken place in the Constitutional Committee which meets under UN auspices in Geneva, the most recent, the fifth, being held in late January. The Committee comprises representatives of the government, civil society and the suit-wearing Istanbul-based opposition. Parties involved in actual armed conflict - the armed opposition groups, the Autonomous Administration, and the Kurds - are excluded. Theoretically devising a new constitution, the Committee is still stumbling over matters of procedure.

US policy under Biden

Few expect much change in US policy. In particular, Biden would need to be very resolute indeed to challenge a bipartisan consensus that the US must keep its military presence in Syria which as much as sanctions punishes the innocent Syria people for the perceived sins of their leaders by depriving them of access to their own oil and grain and keeping the country

divided. Sanctions on the other hand are one area where it seems the incoming administration may not be averse to considering fresh options. One approach being touted is gradual sanctions relief tied to a menu of concessions by the government. Such an approach would be doomed to failure as the concessions sought would inevitably drag the government down a path to submission and its own demise, and would therefore never get past first base. There is pressure, however, on an administration which has claims to show more humanitarian concern than its predecessor, especially in a time of Covid, to do something to alleviate civilian suffering. One suggestion has been to take secondary sanctions off the table. These might permit non-US firms to resume provision of spare parts and medicines, for example.

Outlook

It would hardly be bold to predict little or no movement in 2021. The re-election of the President may serve to reinforce a sense of the futility of attempts at regime change or 'seeking justice' (which amounts to the same thing). It will take more than that, however, to induce Erdogan and Biden to alter a course which amounts to little more than preserving the current volatile status quo in order to spite Assad, Russia and Iran. Sanctions relief if it comes will be marginal and do little to improve the miserable lot of most Syrians. Refugees will continue to fester in their camps. ISIS will get stronger. Political talks under UN auspices are probably past their sell by date and may not even resume. The official FCO line that it looks to Syria to proceed down the Geneva talks path towards 'transition' before sanctions relief could even be considered looks increasingly like a cynical formula for indefinite stasis.

The more promising possibility of movement on the Iran nuclear file might conceivably open up new perspectives, though this is a long shot and matters may evolve in ways not currently easy to foresee. The Americans themselves profess keenness to discuss what they call Iran's 'regional behaviour,' and how realistic would that be with no quid pro quo to offer? What after all would be more logical than for the US to withdraw from Syria and halt its economic warfare in return for Iran withdrawing its forces? Such a common sense approach, however, would be unlikely to commend itself to the hard ball players in Washington, at least not until they were beginning to experience some pain as a result of their policies. Some significant unrest in the Kurdish-dominated areas might create such pain, and that is the area which will probably bear the closest watching over the next year, rather than the Turkish-dominated areas where the Turks have no obvious Achilles heel other than the small Afrin pocket, with its Kurdish population, or any nebulous political negotiations.

It may even be that with Iran broadening its military footprint in North East Syria, a failure to renew the nuclear agreement could lead to Iran losing its current incentive not to rock the boat with the US and instead indulge in some more 'behaviour' in a region of Syria currently seen by some possibly complacent US policy-makers as a gift that keeps on giving.

At all events Syria will no doubt continue to be the cockpit in which regional rivalries play out, compounding the difficulties of domestic conflict.