

Update from Peter Ford, Former British Ambassador to Syria

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Even though the US withdrawal from North East Syria has only been partial, events overall have continued to move inexorably towards a painful final victory for the Syrian government and a return to the status quo antebellum.



Christmas celebrations in Hasaka, North East Syria

US redeployment

For the second time in a year, Trump was persuaded to put off full withdrawal of US forces from Syria, this time on the blatantly spurious grounds that only the US could keep Syria's oil out of ISIS's hands. The humbled ISIS, having lost all its territorial bases, is manifestly in no position to grab the oil-bearing areas of Eastern Syria, and even if it was, a combination of the local forces, the Syrian Army and Russia would be more than capable of snuffing out any new ISIS threat, if only US forces would get out of the way.

It is clear that the real purposes of keeping US forces in Syria are to foster Kurdish separatism and deny to the Syrian government access to a crucial resource, oil, which could alleviate the dire economic condition of the heavily sanctioned country. The thinking in Western capitals appears to be that if sufficient hardship can be inflicted on the Syrian people Assad will have no choice but to surrender power at the negotiating table. So intent is the US on this policy that it apparently used its illegally occupied enclave at Al Tanf to mount drone attacks on the Homs refinery. At the same time the US and other Western powers including the UK have castigated Russia and China for causing suffering by vetoing a UN proposal to send cross border humanitarian assistance to areas in the North controlled by jihadis.

The US regrouping is likely in fact to favour a re-emergence of ISIS. The oil rich area of Deir Ez Zor is Arab, not Kurdish. To control the area the Kurdish-dominated US proxy Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are having to recruit from villages which were hotbeds of ISIS and

even from prison camps where ISIS fighters were kept. Not that ISIS fighters would have any interest in harming the Americans. On the contrary, the oil revenue goes to pay the salaries of the SDF, and besides anything which leads to the weakening of Assad can only be seen by ISIS as Providence paving the way for a new caliphate.

Even when the US appears to strike blows at ISIS and Al Qaida the net results are rarely negative for these organisations. The much hyped killing in November of the already marginalised Al Baghdadi merely created a job vacancy and pleased his ISIS rivals, while strikes on certain factions' leaders in Idlib have removed thorns in the side of the main group, Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham, whose own leaders appear to lead charmed lives. (An effort appears to be under way in Qatari-funded Washington think tanks to condition Western opinion to accept HTS as 'good rebels' not really opposed to the West. To launder its image HTS has set up a front organisation calling itself the Syrian Salvation Government which purports to govern Idlib.)

The US withdrawal may have been only partial but it has led to significant gains for Assad. The Syrian Army is now deployed in multiple locations of Hasaka, Deir Ez Zor and Raqqa provinces including Hasaka city (see picture), which like other parts of secular government-controlled Syria, but not rebel areas, has been marking Christmas with celebrations. The government has control of important water, electricity and grain resources of which it could only dream a few months ago. It sought to engage with the Kurds for their eventual return to the bosom of the state, but these efforts have been subverted by the US, partly with Saudi money. The state has had more success with the Arab tribes of the region, and there are reports of a predominantly Russian-sponsored militia being formed to rival the predominantly Kurdish SDF.

The price of all these gains for the Syrian government has been some skirmishing with Turkey's proxy forces along the border as the Syrian Arab Army deployed to fill gaps left by the US. By and large, however, the deal brokered by Russia with Turkey in the aftermath of the US scuttle is holding up well, contrary to the predictions of most experts. (Rule of thumb: in the Syrian conflict it is fairly safe to assume that most 'expert' opinion will be wrong, yet the same oracles will be consulted time and again.) Over 100,000 Kurdish civilians may have been displaced but many are trickling back. Erdogan keeps promising to relocate many Syrian refugees from Turkey to the border strip Turkey now controls but how serious he is must be doubtful given that there are no homes or jobs for them to go to.

Idlib

Meanwhile Turkey now faces an influx of possibly 100,000 refugees as a result of the December push by Syrian forces backed by Russian air power into southern Idlib. Turkey, having failed to bring to heel Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham, the former Al Qaida affiliate which dominates Idlib, as required by successive agreements with Russia on creating a de-escalation zone, may now be close to abandoning or re-tasking its proxies and concentrating instead on digesting its gains from its success in forcing the US out of the border strip and creating the 'safe zone'.

Almost unnoticed, one of the main results of the US withdrawal has been to put the Syrian army in control over a section of the strategic M4 highway linking Idlib with the East. The

army has very quickly put a stop to the smuggling of oil, under the benevolent eye of US forces, from Hasaka to Idlib, causing power and fuel shortages in Idlib even more dire than those in government-controlled areas.

The gains the Syrian Arab Army has made in Idlib put it in sight of establishing control over the highway linking Aleppo and Damascus. This would give a much needed boost to trade and thus the economy, just as the opening of the border with Iraq at Abu Kamal/Al Qaim has paved the way for more trade between Syria and Iraq.

The media constantly cite a figure of 3 million for the number of people in Idlib, repeating a pattern seen earlier in Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta and the South where an exaggerated statistic is plucked out of the air to dramatise the issue of civilian suffering. More reliable estimates suggest that the population is less than 1 million. Where will the people go when government control is re-established? Nowhere, just as the majority of inhabitants of other pacified areas went nowhere or trickled back once hostilities were over. The estimated 50-80,000 jihadi fighters will fold themselves into the Turkish mercenary forces policing the northern border, drop back into Turkey itself, return to the Central Asian republics whence many of them came, or melt back into the civilian population.

The economy

The economic front of the Syrian conflict looms larger as the military fronts shrink. In December the US Congress approved new legislation termed the 'Caesar Act' (so-called after a CIA informant who provided photographs of thousands of war dead framed to look like torture victims) which has the express aim of making reconstruction impossible. Ordinary Syrians, reeling from the impact of existing sanctions, especially on oil products, await the imposition of Caesar sanctions with dread, while 'friends of Syria' in Washington and London exult.

Information warfare

As more and more whistleblowers and leaks surfaced out of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Warfare (OPCW) the official narrative that Assad used gas in Douma in 2018 looked less and less credible. With the creditable exceptions of the Mail, Fox News and the Independent¹ this extremely important story has been ignored by governments and the main media organisations, which invested so heavily in the narrative in order to justify bombing Syria, sanctions and support for the opposition. The discrediting of the Douma claims and the loss of credibility on the part of the OPCW also cast doubt on the whole string of other alleged uses of chemical weapons. Douma was the only case where inspectors were able to visit a site; all the rest depended on the testimony of pro-jihadi sources now shown to have almost certainly fabricated the Douma evidence.

Constitutional talks

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-war-chemical-weapons-watchdog-opcw-assad-damascus-russia-a9262336.html>

Just as talks between the government and the Kurds have hit the buffers so also with the UN-sponsored talks between government and opposition. After a promising opening session in October, the newly formed Constitutional Committee comprising delegates from government, opposition and civil society, at a second meeting in November quickly reached deadlock over setting an agenda. The jihadi groups which are doing the actual fighting in Idlib refuse to have anything to do with the talks.

Outlook

The progress of the Syrian Arab Army in pacifying territory has been inexorable over the last three years. There is no reason to believe it will not now succeed with its pulsing strategy in Idlib: soften up, advance, pause, repeat. Two pushes since last summer have regained about a third of Idlib. At this pace the province will not be completely retaken in 2020 but soon after.

The new more fluid and unstable situation in the North East with the partial US withdrawal is harder to call. Whether US forces find themselves exposed to attack by local militias may be more a function of US/Iran relations than the dynamics of Syria alone. If the US succeeds however in causing the Syrian government unbearable economic pain then the odds will shorten on Syrian militias mounting serious harassment of US forces even without Iranian intervention.

The dark horse here is the possibility of a grand bargain between the US and Iran whereby sanctions would be lifted all round in return for a new nuclear deal and mutual force withdrawals. This would require statesmanship of a high order, which has not so far been the hallmark of the US administration, and it must be doubtful that Congress would allow it even if the statesmanship was present.

What can be predicted with more certainty is that the entire international chorus, unable to handle the reality that a military solution is being delivered with every passing day, will continue to chant the mantra 'no peace except a negotiated peace,' even though the UN-sponsored negotiations will periodically sputter into life only ever to peter out again.

The Russians pinned their hopes for much of 2019 on Turkey reining in their clients in Idlib, but were they sorely disappointed. The tepid Turkish reaction to the latest push on Idlib suggests that this strategy may at last bear some fruit, thanks to the windfall gain of Trump's scuttle, which has left the Turkish proxy militia formerly known as the Free Syrian Army, now rebranded as the National Syrian Army, in the role of policemen for the new 'safe zone' along part of the border. A solution for this Turkish-controlled area will likely have to await 2021.

2021 is the year when the next Syrian presidential elections are due, and the government are intent on holding them whether or not the Constitutional Committee makes progress. This issue will loom larger and larger.