

Syria, Split Between State and Non-State

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Brief Analysis

Political and military developments in Syria ensure that the country faces a fragmented future.

The future of the Syrian scene is marked primarily by uncertainty, as it is for many countries in the region, or at least for the local feuding forces, and of course for the people, especially considering the huge number of substantive and foreign interventions in the rapidly evolving chain of events. Syria, which for years has been experiencing a devastating war, is groaning under the weight of the unfolding crisis, which has entrenched an alarming state of division between its national, religious, sectarian and political components. The **vast bloodshed** (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101162>) has made it virtually impossible to overcome the psychological barriers that have been created and are rising day by day among the citizens of the same nation.

Starting with the Syrian crisis, we can clearly see the **division** (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/what-russias-endgame-syria>) of its warring parties into either the American or the Russian camp. Lining up behind these two, other global powers are taking up positions according to their security, economic, and political interests. Moreover, regional countries, specifically Iran and Turkey, are **fighting** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-iran-turkey-usa-idUSKBN1WN0W0>) on the Syrian front as a reflection of the historical “Persian and Ottoman” conflict. Against this backdrop, all these forces have formed strategic and tactical alliances on the ground and in the neighborhood, relying on Arab countries and local forces as partners in executing the plans they are pursuing, where the two also have common and intersecting interests.

After ten years of civil war, the Syrian reality today is dominated by a division that is unofficial, but nevertheless imposed de facto on the ground. In northwest Syria, radical extremist factions enlisted by Turkey control the territory, which has become fertile ground and an easy **destination for terrorists** (<https://ctc.usma.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-fight-for-supremacy-in-northwest-syria-and-the-implications-for-global-jihad/>) from various parts of the world. These factions actively **oppose** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/turkish-backed-rebels-leave-trail-abuse-and-criminality-syrias-aftrin>) any

pluralistic, democratic system in Syria, as their goal, first and foremost, is to gain the helm of power with mechanisms characterized by extremism, fanaticism, and terrorism. Taking cover under the name of “opposition to the regime” does not change the contents of such groups; they are the other face of the regime, and the difference is replacing “Ba’ath regime” with “Muslim Brotherhood regime.”

In northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration was **established (<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/syria-kurds-adopt-constitution-autonomous-federal-region>)** as a Syrian national project that managed to attract various people of the region, and also became a pioneering Kurdish nationalism project in modern Kurdish history after the **experiences (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Mahabad>)** of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Republic of Mahabad in Iran in 1946. This Administration enjoys American and European support, particularly military support from the international coalition that formed after ISIS **attacked (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKBN0P60UY20150626>)** the city of Kobani in 2015, in addition to U.S. control over the region of al-Tanf at the Iraqi-Jordanian-Syrian border. Outside these areas, the tyrannical and racist grip of the regime continues to control the country, albeit unevenly, as its grip remains **tenuous (<https://apnews.com/article/iran-russia-financial-markets-bashar-assad-syria-77e6cb4b4981036e9e7597af86a14f61>)** in several regions, such as Badia in the center and Daraa and Suweida in the south.

In general, the Autonomous Administration areas are experiencing remarkable stability and acceptable growth **compared (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/economic-future-northeast-syria>)** with the areas under Turkish occupation and the overwhelming chaos resulting from the terrorist activities and egregious violations against the Kurdish people in Serêkaniyê [Ras al-Ain], Afrin, and Girê Spi [Tal Abyad], as well as the terrorism carried out by extremist groups—such as Hurras al-Din, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the remnants of ISIS—against those who disagree with them ideologically, politically, and religiously in those areas. The same goes for the areas under Syrian government control, which are experiencing ongoing security chaos and a stifling **economic crisis (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/11/world/middleeast/al-assad-syria.html>)**, especially after the imposition of U.S. sanctions legislation, the Caesar Act. Moreover, internal disagreements have emerged within the regime itself and between the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies, as the interests of the latter two **conflict ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle east/syria-war-russia-iran-influence/2021/05/19/7d26851e-a9d1-11eb-bca5-048b2759a489_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syria-war-russia-iran-influence/2021/05/19/7d26851e-a9d1-11eb-bca5-048b2759a489_story.html))** at many points.

Biden’s victory in the U.S. elections kindled Syrians’ hopes for a possible end to the crisis; however, due to the realities and events on the ground and the features of the new U.S. administration’s policy, it is likely that the current stage will be extended for quite some time, preserving the current reality in which Syria is a state and a non-state at the same time, or in other words, Syria is unconstitutionally divided.

To preserve its dominance in Syria and implement its agenda of calming the Iranian front and countering Russia’s expanding influence in Syria, the Biden administration may prioritize supporting and strengthening the capabilities of its allies in northern and eastern Syria by confronting ISIS and preventing it from reappearing, in addition to building the nucleus of an alternative Syria there. This will be accomplished through the consolidation of political stability through Kurdish reconciliation, followed by the formal participation of Kurdish and Autonomous Administration representatives in the political process, as well as by achieving human, scientific, and economic development. The Russian presence and influence east of the Euphrates can be reduced by returning to the official Lavrov-Kerry **agreement (<https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/09/politics/syria-ceasefire-kerry-lavrov/index.html>)** reached between the United States and Russia during the Obama administration, in conjunction with the incorporation of a carrot-and-stick policy for the Turkish side, quietly working to reduce Turkey’s role in Syria and the region and inciting domestic Turkish opinion against it, according to Biden’s presidential campaign platform.

Properly implementing this requires that the American administration to take steps to strengthen the confidence of the residents of northern and eastern Syria, especially the Kurds, if the American administration intends to provide them real and sustainable support. The first of those steps is to put immediate pressure on Turkey to end the [water crisis \(https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-euphrates-water-crisis-drought-outlook-17-june-2021\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-euphrates-water-crisis-drought-outlook-17-june-2021) of the Euphrates River and the Alouk water station, followed by crucial steps for the Kurds, namely, the end of the Turkish occupation of their areas, via political understandings or other available means. Regarding the Iranian presence in Syria, Israeli planes are taking charge of the situation and carrying out their missions with green lights from the Americans and the Russians.

At this point, the Kurds must race against time to unite their ranks, establish their cohesive authority as masters of their own political decisions in Syria, distance themselves from Kurdish tensions and conflicts and replace those with maximum Kurdish coordination in the north and east. They must also expand and develop their administration in partnership with the various components of northern and eastern Syria, promote a state of coexistence and civil peace, and achieve the greatest possible human development—socially, economically, politically, scientifically, and militarily.

This new equation will force the regime and its allies to offer several concessions in terms of accepting the constitutional legitimacy of eastern Euphrates, i.e., the Autonomous Administration, and, accordingly, the legitimacy of a permanent American presence in Syria, especially in a beneficial or alternative Syria east of the Euphrates. At the same time, the regime will try to retain some important cards to control northwest Syria, prevent U.S. influence in northwest Syria and remove it from Turkish command.

Especially with Russia distracted by its conflict in Ukraine, Moscow would be forced to accept this reality. Continuing the crisis at this current pace will exhaust it militarily, economically, and even politically, especially with the emergence of clear divisions between it and Iran and the leaders of the Syrian regime itself. Russia will try to come to an agreement with the Americans that the area west of the Euphrates will be its area of influence—with this regime or its alternative. Therefore, Russia is hastening to conclude the largest number of military and economic agreements with the current depleted regime.

In sum, present-day Syria will be divided between three decentralized entities, so that the Syria of the future can be officially and constitutionally united among three or more entities, regardless of the names of those entities. As for a centralized and totalitarian Syria, it is a thing of the past and gone forever. ❖

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