

Will the End of the Syrian Civil War Bring a Chechnization of Syria?

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For the first weeks of 2016, the imminent “Geneva 3” conference was hyped as the best chance to find a political solution to the seemingly indefinite Syrian civil war. Despite the buzz and high expectations for diplomacy, violence marked the eve of the negotiations. Syrian soldiers, the YPG, Afghan mercenaries, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Hezbollah militiamen and Russian planes attacked the Syrian opposition with unrelenting fury, creating mass destruction in northwest Syria. The increased ferocity of the Russian strikes shows that Russia—cash-strapped and fearing the repercussions of an intractable quagmire—presented negotiations as a final appeal to the Syrian opposition to pledge allegiance to it or face scorched earth warfare and ethnic cleansing similar to Russian operations in the Chechen territories – the Chechnization of Syria. Unfazed, the Syrian opposition rejected Russia’s offer for capitulation, walked out of Geneva, and ruled out future negotiations unless their baseline conditions were met.

As a result, Russia assumed the role of battlefield bully in an attempt to convince minorities and opposition factions that surrendering is the only way to avoid around the clock carpet bombing and gripping sieges. The Syrian regime’s complicity in said Chechnization highlights the political costs that Bashar al-Assad has been willing to pay to evade the fate of other deposed Arab strongmen. Instead, Assad has chosen to compromise Syria’s sovereignty twice, first with Hezbollah and then with Iran, although neither decision met with great tactical success. Shiite paramilitaries pledged that they would stabilize the situation on the ground but failed to deliver as they prioritized the political front by promoting the “Islamic Revolution.” In the absence of interference of the Syrian security forces, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps worked to transform loyalists-held cities into bastions of Iranian influence. Assad, located a more effective interlocutor, and now Vladimir Putin is seeking his own political gains in Syria through military success.

Popular belief holds that Assad is a symbol of Russian influence over Syria. In reality, he is even weaker, merely a placeholder for Russia’s visions of its future role there. This image is not so far removed from reality; Russian soldiers now wield a cult-like following in loyalist cities such as Latakia and Tartous, where citizens credit the Russian army with saving their country from both radical Islamists and Assad’s reckless decisions. Syrians with Baathist-Marxist ideologies firmly believe that the Russians will quickly finish off the opposition and bring an end to the costly war.

But Putin's master plan has now moved beyond Assad, and may require the Syrian strongman to cede power. Naturally, Assad despises and refuses the idea, yet unlike Iran and Hezbollah, Putin is powerful enough to incapacitate the president and confine him to limited roles were he compelled to do so. Putin also knows all too well the dangers of remaining entangled in a foreign conflict and the risks of going too far in supporting a lame-duck president. This foresight fueled the recent announcement that the Russians would gradually withdraw from Syria.

This Russian impatience is also visible in its response to Assad's refusal to acknowledge and negotiate with the opposition. Vitaly Churkin, Russia's representative to the UN, has warned Assad against the dangers of ditching the political process. "Russia has invested very seriously in this crisis, politically, diplomatically and now also militarily [...] If Syria follows Russia's leadership in resolving this crisis, then they have a chance to come out of it in a dignified way." The threat is unspoken but clear: there is no chance for survival, much less victory, if Assad strays from Russian instruction.

And Russia's recent actions have backed up its threats. By withdrawing planes from Syria and announcing that it is ready to join the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, Russia is sending a clear message to the Syrian president that he must begin to negotiate seriously. With Russia pressuring Assad, the ball is now back in the court of the United States; the outcome of the negotiations largely rests on the Obama administration's willingness to act based on the new realities that Russia has created on the ground.

But Assad's less powerful allies may finish the path of destruction that Russia began without the Kremlin's help. Russia may be ready to reach a compromise with the West, but Iran's interests lie in a guarantee that Syria's future president will keep the Tehran-Damascus-Beirut supply route open to maintain Hezbollah's weapons supply for a future conflict with Israel. Accepting Iran's demand is equivalent to political suicide; a cosmetic rearrangement of Syria's broken sectarian-fascist system will only intensify conflict and further divide ordinary Syrian citizens.

Iranian interference has also helped ensure that the diplomatic and political progress in the Syrian civil war has occurred at a slower pace than World War II. For five years, the mullahs have not made offering of goodwill towards the opposition. They continue to undermine the United States and the international community by spouting anti-American rhetoric and launching ballistic missiles in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. The only acceptable solution to Tehran is for Assad to finish his four-year term so that their interests are insured. This unyielding resolve may guarantee that Chechnization is the fate of the Syrian people.

If Russia indeed backs out, Chechnization Assad will instead rely on the Iranians to help complete the process. This prospect carries major repercussions for the Middle East and international community. One of the possible outcomes of a continued scorched-earth conflict are Bantustans emerging in the former Syria, which could give rise to Russian satellite states. The first of these states has already been declared: the Russian-sponsored "Federation of North Syria." Kurdish victories so close to the Turkish border have presented the risk of a Sunni incursion into northern Syria. The added threat has given breathing room to extremist factions willing to fight Kurds on behalf of foreign Sunni powers. The United States is one of the biggest losers if terrorists and fascists are granted autonomous territories.

Moreover, the United States must begin to wonder how much longer Saudi Arabia and Turkey can wait before they ramp up pressure on the ground and push their proxies into regime strongholds. With the war in Yemen winding down and President Obama's term expiring, Sunni countries may be ready to act on the "Plan B" that Saudi Arabia has mentioned if negotiations fail. The intransigence of the Obama administration towards the unshakable position of the Syrian regime and Iran is also jeopardizing the fragile Syrian ceasefire that has held as both sides await the outcome of political negotiations. The United States has insisted that peace will only come through an agreement with the opposition and regime forces in order to present a united force against the terrorist groups that have taken claim to Syrian territory. This is a goal for a perfect world, and raises the question of whether the United States is

willing to risk its allies going alone in Syria without presenting a clear plan for addressing the fate of terrorist groups other than negotiations.

Assad continues to prolong the question of political transition because Bashar, like his father Hafez, Saddam Hussein, and other Middle Eastern despots, do not negotiate or even acknowledge their enemies existence. The Syrian regime and its mouthpieces describe Syria's modern opposition as the "so-called Opposition," which paints a clear picture of the regime's disdain for power-sharing, political reform, and democracy. Assad is simply carrying out the vision that he presented shortly after the uprising started with little to no adjustment for other involved parties' requirements or interests.

Assad and his regime foreshadowed the havoc that the Syrian government is now wreaking worldwide in 2012, warning that "If you sow chaos in Syria, you may be infected yourself." In a fiery rant weeks later, Assad's handpicked mufti Ahmed Hassoun lashed out the West, promising that "droves" of Syrian martyrs would be ready to march to Europe. Assad, a tactical beneficiary of ISIS's spread, is pleased with the Syrian-Turkish-EU refugee surge and ISIS-claimed terrorist attacks in San Bernardino, Ankara, Istanbul, Paris, and Brussels. The tyrant, who is potentially positioned to kill as many as Hitler, could be gearing for a fight to the finish. "I live and die in Syria," proclaimed Assad in a thinly veiled message that he would die before agreeing to leave Syria. By sitting back and waiting for the world to deal its hand, the Obama administration's policies are providing Assad more time to plan his next smoke screen and drag Syria closer to total, all-out Chechnization. Now is the time for Americans to take a proactive approach and talk seriously with people that may actually listen: Syrian MPs, officers, businessmen, and ministers. Unlike Assad, they might be interested in salvaging what's left of their country.

Dani Tahrawi has served as the editor-in-chief of the Iraq Monitor since 2014. This item was originally published on the Fikra website (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=8930&lang=en#.VvgtN-IrLIU>). ❖

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