The Syrian Conflict is Already a Decade Old

March 15 marks the 10th anniversary of the war in Syria, where the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) estimates that of the country’s 18 million inhabitants, 36 percent have lost their homes, 6.6 million have become internal refugees, and 13.4 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. Over 5.6 million people have fled the Syrian Arab Republic since 2011, mostly to Turkey, Lebanon, and Germany.

Before the conflict began, in 2011, Syria was one of the most rapidly developing countries in the Middle East, with a good standard of living and low inflation compared to neighboring countries. According to the GDP growth rate published by the World Bank in 2007, Syria’s performance was similar to Israel and Kuwait, surpassing the regional average (5.7% vs. 5.1%).

On September 30, 2015, at Assad’s request, Russia entered the Syrian war on the side of the Syrian president, which significantly shifted the balance of power in Assad’s favor and helped him retake Aleppo and other important cities. Although full-scale hostilities have ended in most parts of the country, the Syrian crisis is still far from over.

Chronic economic problems are exacerbated by the collapse of the financial system in neighboring Lebanon, as well as national and regional restrictive measures in the fight against COVID-19, the sanctions policy of the West. All of this worsened conditions for Syrians, especially during 2020, when the Syrian pound collapsed six times over 2019, or nearly 70 times over prewar 2010. This was largely a consequence of the US “Caesar’s Law,” which stiffened other countries’ economic cooperation with Syria, thus becoming an important factor in the country’s complications.

Today the country is divided into four zones of influence. Damascus officials control most of Syria, including all eight major cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, Deraa and Deir ez-Zor. These territories are home to
about 12 million people.

The remaining third of the country is divided into three parts. The northeast (the entire left bank of the Euphrates with its rich oil fields) continues to be under the control of US-backed Kurdish groups. This is about a quarter of the country and 80% of all its natural resources.

The northwest (the area west of Aleppo and the section of the border from Tel Abyad to Ras el-Ain) is controlled by rebel groups affiliated with Turkey.

The source of resistance still remains in Idlib, where a joint patrol is conducted by Russia and Turkey. Insurgent forces still remain there, including jihadists from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a group affiliated with al-Qaeda (both banned in Russia). Turkish forces are also present there.

Only 15% of the land border is controlled by the Syrian army, the rest is in the hands of outside players. The same is true of the maritime and air borders.

The ongoing war in Syria is largely due to the involvement of international players in the conflict. Thus, the continuing acuteness of the situation around Idlib is related to the Turkish troops deployed there, and any action there is fraught with the risk of a direct clash with Turkey. Any clash in Trans-Euphrates, where there are American, Russian and Turkish military personnel, can escalate into an open conflict.

After pro-American fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces knocked out Daesh (banned in the Russian Federation) terrorists from the oil fields, the United States began to establish production and smuggling of resources from northeastern Syria. Former US President Donald Trump explicitly said that the main task of the US Armed Forces in the region is to keep control of the Syrian oil fields. Thirty million dollars a month - that’s how much, according to the Russian Defense Ministry, the US earns from oil production in Syria. The schemes of its supply have long been fine-tuned: the largest deposits are guarded by soldiers of US private military companies and Kurdish militias under the control of the Pentagon. Syrian authorities have already repeatedly appealed to the UN Security Council to ban the United States from plundering the country’s oil resources.

According to Moscow and Damascus, the US and its allies, using financial and political leverage, put pressure on international organizations, forcing them to “turn a blind eye” to the grave consequences of the sanctions they imposed on Syria and the violation of its sovereignty. On March 12, Russia and the SAR appealed to the international community to put pressure on the US to counter its inhumane policies towards Syria. “We demand that the American side cease its destabilizing influence on the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and strictly comply with international law and the principles of the United Nations. Only the complete restitution of control of the Syrian authorities over all the illegally occupied territories of the US and its allies and the removal of sanctions will allow to resolve the crisis and restore lasting peace,” reads the statement of the inter-agency coordination headquarters of the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR). “The Syrian people must be given real help to restore the economy and provide decent living conditions,” Moscow and Damascus stress.

The reconstruction of post-war Syria, the return of refugees, and a political settlement are interconnected. According to the most conservative estimates, it will take 50 years and at least $300 billion to patch the holes. But no one is ready to pay yet. The West has made it clear in the past that it makes its assistance conditional on political change. In July 2020, parliamentary elections were held in Syria, and in August Assad approved the new government of the SAR. Elections for a Syrian president are scheduled for the summer of 2021, but Western countries have already said they will not take the election process seriously if Assad is involved. On March 16, the US, Britain, France, Germany and Italy reiterated the same position in a joint statement of the foreign ministers of the five countries.

Nothing today indicates that the situation in Syria will change fundamentally in the coming months or years. The new administration will try to keep the remaining US troops in Iraq and Syria, which, however, will be primarily concerned with strengthening its position in Syria and the region and enhancing control over the oil wealth of that country. Under these conditions, only a diplomatic solution, where the Astana troika — Russia, Turkey, and Iran — will try to negotiate with the US and other participants about the future of Syria, is acceptable for a way out of the current situation.

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